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The CONQUEROR

from a Dying Kingdom



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Chapter 1 — The First Lecture

I

It had been two days since I'd walked around the royal capital and saved the princess through a strange sequence of events. The opening ceremony had since concluded and a new academic year had begun. It was finally time for classes to start.

Just like my dad, Rook, had told me, mornings at the Knight Academy were used for gym classes. Or rather, for combat training.

The new first-graders had all gathered in a facility resembling a dojo after eating breakfast.

The dojo was a wooden building, large enough to contain two judo halls side by side. It could've been even more spacious if the kingdom's level of architecture and structural engineering allowed for such a large wooden hall to be constructed safely without support columns. The Knight Academy had several such facilities, including other, smaller dojos that groups of students could reserve for practice.

After we'd arrived, not knowing what to expect, a man—I assumed he was the instructor—yelled at us. "All right! The lesson's starting! Everyone, pick up one of these wooden spears!"

I'd expected him to at least lecture us a little first.

"What are you waiting for?! Grab one!" he cried loudly, spurring the children into action.

Everyone began taking the rods that were protruding from a long wooden box behind the instructor. I grabbed one along with everyone else.

The rods had a large, round ball of cotton at one end that served as padding for what was contained inside. There was supposed to be some lead in each so that it'd be as heavy as a real spear tip, but it didn't feel like there was when I

swung mine around a little. These particular spears might've been reserved for the younger students only. No doubt a troublemaker could've done some real damage if they tried hitting another kid over the head with a weighted one—they could even kill them.

I returned to my place and waited, resting the butt of the spear against the ground. My teacher, Soim, had taught me this pose, but I saw a lot of other kids doing it too, so the practice couldn't have been something unique to the Ho family. But not everyone knew how to hold their spear. In fact, it looked like some of the kids had never even held one before.

"All right, now we can start. Everyone, line up against that wall and come at me one at a time."

Huh? That's how we start our training? He's not going to explain any techniques to us?

"Don't just stand there! Against the wall!" the instructor yelled.

The students all began arranging themselves against the wall.

Although he shouted a lot, he didn't look particularly angry. This whole thing was probably just a part of his yearly routine.

"Wait! You'll go first! Come here."

I wasn't the first one invited.

"Yes, you. What's your name? Carol, right? Hold your spear ready."

I couldn't believe he was starting off by barking out orders at the princess—not to mention future queen—of his own country. He sure had some guts. It was possible his bravado was just an act to hide his anxiety, but it was admirable either way.

"O-Okay. So, I just hold it like this?" Carol said.

"What do you mean, 'okay'? It's 'yes, sir'!"

"Y-Yes, sir."

"All right! Hold your spear ready! Come at me whenever you like."

"Yes, sir!" Carol responded energetically before attacking him with her spear.

As Carol thrust repeatedly, the instructor deflected her spear aside with a series of pleasing clacks that resounded through the dojo. The instructor let her continue for about three minutes before finally knocking Carol off-balance with a powerful hit to her spear. Then, he quickly jabbed his spear toward her chest, stopping just before it hit her.

“Class two. Remember that number. Next! Come at me in the order that you’ve lined up against the wall!” the instructor said loudly.

At some point, a second instructor joined and began fighting kids in sequence starting from the back of the line. Even so, each fight took a few minutes, so it went on for a long time. If I’d positioned myself next to Myalo, we could’ve chatted for a while, but we’d ended up far apart because I hadn’t seen this coming.

For a while I was bored, but then Myalo himself stepped forward. He had his spear at the ready, but it looked to me like he’d never held one in his life.

“Hiyaaa!” he cried while thrusting it at the instructor, who dodged it without much trouble. The instructor must have noticed Myalo’s lack of skill. If he’d parried the spear with some force like he’d done with Carol, Myalo might not have had the strength to stop it from flying out of his grasp—he really was that thin.

“Hiyaaa! Haah, haah...”

Just lifting the wooden spear looked challenging for him. He was out of breath before even a few minutes had passed.

“All right! Class four. If you can, do training runs in your own time to build up some stamina.”

“Haah, haah, y-yes...sir...” Myalo gasped for breath as he headed back to his place by the wall. Class four was probably rock bottom.

Would be nice to be in Myalo’s class since he’s the one person I get along with... But if it means being in class four, I’d better give up on that. It’ll just lead to more trouble when Rook and Soim hear about it.

The spear looked heavy in Myalo’s arms as he reached the wall, still panting heavily.

Shit-for-brains' test went just as I'd expected—he went charging in like a bull, only to be knocked back. He'd relied on brute force without much finesse to his technique, but he still had *some*. His dad Galla must've trained him a little in the basics. Still, it was good enough to get him in class two, which led me to think very few people would be in class one.

And then came my turn.

"Let's make it a fair fight," I said with a bow of my head.

It was considered good etiquette for a warrior to bow their head before a fight, but not so low that the opponent went out of view. The person bowing had to remain ready to respond to a surprise attack. But this custom didn't come about because no one ever trusted their opponents—we took such care because entering a battle without adopting a warrior's mindset was disrespectful to the opponent.

"Now start," he said.

I held my wooden spear ready. *All right, how should I do this?*

I was at a major disadvantage from the start. Not only was I weaker, but my child-sized spear was short, and my entire body—arms included—was smaller than my opponent's. Simply keeping at a safe distance would mean that my spear couldn't reach his body.

These were obvious problems for a child, and there was little I could do to compensate. The other students had tried charging in to get within reach of his body, but that was rash. The instructor could always drive the student back or use the ample space to step aside.

"Yes, sir," I replied.

First, I lightly thrust my spear at his off-hand, but then quickly retracted it. I'd already seen that he would always respond to that kind of thrust by knocking the student's spear aside. When I saw him move the tip of his weapon in response to my feint, I followed up by aiming a quick thrust, putting my body weight behind it this time, at his spear-bearing arm.

It caught the instructor off guard, but he drew his spear close, ready to respond. I knew my attack would be blocked, so when his spear met mine, I

stepped in close, almost jumping toward him, to close the gap between us.

Now my spear was within reach of his body. The instructor aimed a kick at me. It was a predictable way for any adult to react—a long-handled weapon was ill-suited for repelling a small opponent darting about near one's feet. In fact, I'd been kicked by Soim countless times.

I bent my knees and rotated on my heel like a dancer to avoid his kick. But his foot still grazed my shoulder before I could get clear. I was slightly off-balance and forced to recover, which prevented me from acting as quickly as I would've liked.

I pulled my spear back again, then thrust it upward toward the instructor's jaw. Unfortunately, my upper body wasn't in the right position; I wasn't able to put my legs into it. The instructor had no trouble dodging a thrust powered by nothing but my arms.

That was when the instructor's spear came at me. The shaft swept across the ground, and I caught it against my own spear. I couldn't maintain my footing because my stance wasn't quite right. When the powerful sweep hit my spear, it sent my whole body tumbling over, as if I'd been washed away by his incredible strength. While I rolled on the ground, the instructor closed the gap in an instant. Without giving me a moment to recover, he thrust his spear toward me, stopping just before my eyes.

"I concede," I said.

"You've had training from the Ho family's veterans. You're in class one. Next!"

I picked myself up off the floor and walked back to the line of students.

Class one? That's fine and dandy, but couldn't he just give me free credits like they did for my lecture courses? I kinda thought he might... I should've asked Myalo whether or not it's even possible.

When I was back against the wall, Dolla—my least favorite person—stepped out of the line to come over to me.

I was surprised he'd dared to budge from his spot. I thought we'd all shared a tacit understanding that we weren't to leave our places. I supposed he was living by his own messed up set of rules, as usual.

“You haven’t won. Just you wait—I’ll get in class one.”

Once the idiot was done with his moronic little speech, he went back to his place. He wasn’t reprimanded—either the instructor hadn’t seen, or he’d turned a blind eye since the exchange was over so quickly.

What’s his problem?



The Knight Academy’s curriculum was mostly made up of practical classes in the morning and lecture classes in the afternoon. Since I’d been able to skip over so many of the lecture courses, I generally parted with my year group during the afternoon.

In the afternoon I had an advanced abacus class. Unfortunately, Myalo couldn’t be there with me because he had another lecture to attend at the same time, which meant I was alone. But that was nothing new—I’d often sat alone in lectures during my college years.

I entered the lecture theater and found that its three hundred or so seats had mostly been filled. I’d imagined a small classroom, so I was surprised to find the room crowded even though I’d arrived fairly early. I wondered whether it was because the Cultural Academy students took these ordinary courses too.

I sat in an empty seat, then retrieved my personal abacus from my bag and put it on the desk. There was nothing to do but wait.

“Hey, you from the Knight Academy?” the guy next to me suddenly said.

I turned and saw a good-looking man, tanned and toned, sitting beside me. He must’ve been about twenty years old. I’d seen many men at the Knight Academy, and plenty of them had similarly impressive physiques, but almost none had a tan.

Shanti people didn’t darken easily, even if they worked outdoors. Part of that was down to their physical traits, but the main cause was the low level of UV rays in this region’s sunlight.

“Hello. That’s right,” I replied.

“I’m Harol Harrell.”

Harol Harrell. I'd never heard that surname before. More to the point, he'd introduced himself without being asked. It felt a little overly forward.

"I'm Yuri Ho."

"Ooh," Harol reacted with exaggerated surprise. "The heir to the Ho family? Didn't think I'd meet famous people here."

Yet again, someone knew my name. It was starting to creep me out. I wouldn't have minded so much if I'd done something worthy of a Nobel Prize, but I was well-known just for being me.

"I don't think I count as famous."

"You skipped a bunch of grades to get here, right?"

He probably meant that I'd gotten exemption from a bunch of courses.

"Yes, that's right."

"I started taking academy courses last year. It's been decided that I'll take over from my dad eventually," Harol explained.

Last year? But how? He looks about twenty.

It was possible to enter both the Knight Academy and the Cultural Academy from the age of ten. There was nothing stopping someone from waiting until twenty, but it would look a little odd. There wasn't a single student in my year who was much older than I was. There was no way someone this old could've started at the academy just a year ago—he'd have been way too old to enroll.

"I hope you don't mind me asking, but which school are you from?" I inquired.

"I'm auditing."

Huh? Auditing? What's that?

"You mean you're not with the Knight or Cultural Academy? You're just an ordinary person?"

That's when I realized he wasn't wearing any kind of uniform—he was in everyday clothes.

"Didn't you know? Loads of commoners come here as auditors. I'll bet half the rabble here are like me."

Seriously? I've never heard of that. And he says about half of them here are? That'd make half the people here commoners. That's a lot. Well, it explains why their clothes are so varied.

"Do you get something for attending? Some sort of qualification?"

"Nah, nothing like that. But auditing's cheap, and there're good teachers here. People come from far and wide for this academy."

"People come here purely to learn?"

Well, I can't fault that.

"It's nothing as grand as that. Take me, for example—I'm learning the abacus 'cause of the business my dad runs. And I wouldn't get much respect from other businessmen if I couldn't read and write, would I? And as for nobles, I wouldn't even be able to talk to one without some education. I'd never make connections."

Oh...

The lack of compulsory education meant people had to take it upon themselves to come here and learn. It was certainly cheaper than hiring a governess.

The other problem with governesses was that there was no way to know whether they were teaching accurate facts. On the other hand, when someone attended the same lectures as the big nobles, their knowledge would at least match up with everything their customers believed...even if it was all nonsense.

"Does that mean everyone just takes the courses they need? No compulsory classes, I imagine."

"Yeah, that's right."

"I see... You mentioned that your family is involved in business. What sort of business, exactly?"

"Foreign trade. We're sailors."

"Trading with Kilhina?"

Our kingdom's only remaining trading partner was the Kilhina Kingdom. The

rest had all gone to ruin.

“That’s right.”

So he sails to Kilhina to trade goods? Can’t say I envy him.

If Kilhina ever collapsed, he’d have no one to trade with. And since Kilhina was already under invasion from a superior force, his future prospects weren’t looking so great.

“Isn’t your business threatened by the war?” I asked.

Harol scowled as if I’d brought back some unpleasant memories. “We’re going under.”

So it’s bad enough to threaten his business?

“It’s that bad...?”

Could Kilhina’s situation be even more precarious than I thought?

“All the goods we carried were made in a place called Toga Province...until it got destroyed.”

Sounds like merchants are going down first as Kilhina falls apart.

“So that’s how things are now?”

“Thing is, we can’t even trade different goods ’cause it’s stepping on other merchants’ toes.”

Sounds like he’s really in trouble.

“That’s...a tricky problem.”

I got the impression that Harol was inheriting a business on the verge of bankruptcy. This world wasn’t home to forgiving systems like limited liability. Corporate bankruptcy would likely end with him being stripped of everything he owned. He might avoid that fate by putting an end to the business himself, but it wasn’t easy to give up something that had been in the family for generations.

His best bet was to create some sort of new good to trade. I had a few ideas that were guaranteed to succeed, but Harol’s family were traders, not manufacturers, so there was no point in sharing them. Besides, I wasn’t about to go *that* far to help a stranger.

“Still, I’m not giving up on Harrell Trading. I’ve gotta do something.”

Harol frowned like he was in a tough spot. The sense of responsibility must’ve weighed on him.

“Well, I hope you find a way,” I replied. *Just do what you can. I’ll be rooting for you.* But suddenly, I had an idea. “Have you ever considered learning to speak Kulatish so you can trade with the Kulati?”

If you can’t do business with the Shanti, then why not try the Kulati?

“With the Kulati?” Harol parroted, looking confused.

“I know they despise us, but I doubt there’s a law that says we can’t trade with them. Then again, I suppose you might get executed if you act like a spy.”

“Really?”

“I could be totally wrong. I’m no legal expert.”

I began to regret that I hadn’t chosen my words more carefully. It was just an idea that had come into my head while we talked.

“I’ll look into it. I don’t know how I’d trade with them though,” he said.

“I’m not sure either. The hard part would be making the initial connections. And even if we *are* allowed to trade with Kulati, their countries might be forbidden to trade with *us*.”

“Is that right?”

“No, I don’t know. I’m just saying they probably don’t allow it.”

I really had no idea. All I knew was that they’d probably broken off all ties before declaring war on us. Severing of relations, as they say.

The process was probably the same in this world as my previous one. The reason for severing relations was because of all the problems it could cause when people traveled to, or did business with, the other nation during the war. Prospective travelers could be taken hostage, sent to a prison camp, or—if they were businessmen—have their assets taken away. It made sense to close the border and prevent people from traveling across it beforehand. The measure was so obvious that it was unlikely that the situation was any different here.

Then again, there would always be back channels. People who cared more about profits than staying on the right side of the law were always willing to do business. It didn't take brains to figure this out; Harol was bound to have realized it.

"The problem is you could get killed during those first steps when you're trying to make initial connections," I pointed out.

The risk was high. Getting started was going to be the hardest part.

"Hmmm..." Harol was deep in thought. "If I get caught over there, they'd make me a slave."

They would?

"Sorry for saying all of this without thinking. I know it's not that easy," I said.

It'd be on my conscience if this guy got enslaved after setting foot on some Kulati island.

"No, it's interesting," Harol replied.

"It is...?"

"It *could* be interesting," he repeated.

Saying it twice meant that I'd seriously caught his attention. Even though it had been my idea in the first place, I now wanted to talk him out of it.

"It's too dangerous," I warned him.

"It's worth a shot. I'm used to dealing with pirates."

"Oh. Well...okay."

Pirates? Does he mean Kulati pirates?

Harol was still hemming and hawing to himself and nodding repeatedly when the teacher entered to start the lesson.



It was several days later when I began the long-awaited Kulatish lessons.

Unlike the other courses, there were barely any other students waiting when I entered the classroom. Harol Harrell the merchant was there, as was Myalo,

who'd signed up for the course along with me. Besides us, there were only five or so other students.

The course clearly wasn't popular, and judging by the number of uniforms, Harol was the only commoner.

The people of this country still hadn't realized the importance of learning foreign languages. The very concept of cosmopolitanism might've been alien to the Shanti. The separation between us was far greater than the separation between different ethnicities of humans in my past life; the Shanti and Kulati were so different that the two couldn't interbreed—they were different species entirely. The very idea of diplomacy with Kulati might not have been on anyone's mind in the first place.

Or perhaps the idea of learning a foreign language just hadn't occurred to people after nine hundred years of an approach to the world that was characterized by national isolation and mercantilism.

Myalo was already in the lecture theater, so I sat beside him.

"Hello," he greeted me.

"Hey."

There was nothing in particular to talk about. We'd talked plenty that morning and had nothing left to discuss.

"Hey there." Harol plopped down in the seat beside me. He must've seen me enter and then moved to be near me.

"Hello," Myalo greeted Harol too.

"Who's this? Introduce me," Harol said.

"This is Myalo Gudineil. Oh, and this is Harol Harrell."

"Nice to meet you, Harol," Myalo said with a smile. It was the public smile he always used when meeting new people.

Harol's reaction was extreme. He suddenly looked terrified.

"N-Nice to meet you, Mr. Gudineil."

Myalo seemed to scare him for some reason. He was even calling him

“Mister.”

“Harrell? I don’t suppose your family owns Harrell Trading?” Myalo asked.

You know him, Myalo?

“Y-Yes. Th-That’s right. I’m honored that you’ve heard of—”

“You can speak to me like you’d speak to anyone else—like you talk to Yuri. I don’t mind at all.”

“A-All right.” Harol was visibly relieved.

What’s that about? He was really forward when he first met me.

“You’re right. I’m actually set to take over Harrell Trading.”

“Is Harrell Trading that famous?” I whispered to Myalo.

Myalo leaned close and whispered back, “It’s not a huge company; it’s about average size. But I’ve heard that it almost collapsed due to interference from the Marmosets. They’re in the business of harassing merchants who refuse to pay bribes.”

Wow. The Marmosets sound like a mafia organization. And we’ve got one of them here as the director of the Cultural Academy. Letting the mafia run the place sounds like a bad joke.

This explained why Harol feared Myalo more than me. A gangster’s son (Myalo) could be a lot more threatening than a politician’s son (me).

“What are you two talking about?” Harol sounded worried.

I looked at Myalo as I pondered whether it was okay to tell Harol. Myalo nodded mischievously.

“He was just telling me you had some problems with racketeers,” I explained.

“Uh... Yeah, maybe...”

It seemed Myalo wasn’t completely wrong. Harol looked like he was struggling to suppress his anger. Considering who he sat next to, he had to stop himself from cursing the witches.

“Why did you decide to learn Kulatish, Harol?” Myalo asked, trying to change

the subject.

“Well, uh... Me and this ki—”

Was he about to call me “this kid”?

“Me and him have an abacus class together, and he told me I should just trade with the Kulati if I’ve got no other business.”

“With...Kulati?” Myalo knitted his eyebrows. Even he seemed to think that the concept was crazy.

“My dad said it’s a good idea. I put an application in right away and got into this course,” Harol continued.

“It was just a random thought. Think it’ll be allowed?” I asked Myalo casually.

Myalo thought for a moment before replying. “I suspect it’ll be allowed, but there could be some complications.”

It was just like Myalo to pick his words carefully like that.

“You mean he might get killed? I don’t think that’ll stop him.”

Harol nodded his head.

“Very well. Still, I’m worried that greater problems may result from the actions taken in response to said complications.”

“What do you mean?” I replied.

“Actions taken in response to said complications”? I’ve never had any trouble with the Shanish language, but even I’m having trouble unpacking that.

“I expect your problems will persist until you’ve found a trading partner. Naturally, that will entail some danger. I expect you’re already considering procuring weapons and a personal army in order to secure your escape route, lest you be abducted or murdered,” Myalo continued.

It was implicitly understood that Harol’s potential trading partners were probably criminals of various sorts. Personal safety was an obvious concern when dealing with such people. Calling it a “personal army” sounded shady, but supplying the ship’s crew with weapons for protection was an obvious step.

“It could even amount to an invasion of Kulati territory. The problem is that

you might kill large numbers of Kulati, which would look like an act of piracy, regardless of whether you were acting in self-defense. Piracy is punishable by death, so even if you're lucky enough to escape, you might be captured and hanged if your deeds come to light later."

Ah, I see. That could lead to him breaking the law. I hadn't thought of that.

Now that I really thought about it, I realized the whole plan was asking for trouble. If someone strolled into an enemy state, it was easy to imagine a scenario where they'd be forced to kill a ton of people as they retreated. If the initial goal was negotiation, it might help their defense a little, but wouldn't change the fact that they'd shown up and started their own little war.

"Ah, yeah... Hmmm..." Harol was thinking deeply.

"There's definitely a risk, but you'd be able to obtain goods that don't exist in our own kingdom. The payoff could be substantial. Yuri is full of great ideas."

For some reason I was being complimented.

"I don't know," I said. "I'm starting to think it's a suicide mission."

"Ambitious merchants are known for being willing to face such danger," Myalo replied, as if that was a given.

He might've been right—merchants could either make a killing on some high-risk, high-reward trade, or suck up to an influential individual to gain some special privilege. Harol clearly wasn't cut out for the latter, and he'd probably made a few enemies already, so the former was his best bet.

"By the way, I hear that our teacher is an actual Kulati," Myalo murmured softly after Harol had gone quiet.

"Huh?"

I had no idea. There are Kulati living in this kingdom? Well, I suppose there's no reason there wouldn't be.

"Oh, really? I've never seen one," I replied.

"It's a first for me too," Myalo said.

I see.

"I had no idea that Kulati lived in the kingdom," I said.

"As a general rule, they don't. There's too high a risk of them being spies."

That makes sense.

"But there must be some. What sort of people are they?"

"Exiles."

Ah. I see.

"People who can't live in Kulati countries anymore? But why wouldn't they flee to the east?"

Eurasia was a big place. I would've expected exiles to have more luck finding a safe country to the east; or perhaps even south, toward Africa. Anything had to be better than escaping to a freezing-cold country populated by another species that spoke a different language.

"People come here when they're likely to be tracked down and killed. This is one place where the pursuers can't follow."

"Ah, that kinda makes sense."

There was no risk of Kulati hunters here, as the refugees would be difficult targets. Even if an assassin had been dispatched, it would be obvious that they were from a different race, making it difficult for them to go unnoticed as they approached their mark. Then again, it wasn't a simple matter of hiring a single hit man—it would require a large-scale operation involving multiple skilled assassins willing to risk their lives, along with some very careful planning. The cold outside also made it difficult to bring an army here. The bounty needed to have that one person killed like that would be excessive to make up for the cons.

"So we just get the dangerous ones?" *People whose situations are so hopeless that they'd flee into a war zone.*

"If we investigate and find that the individual's wanted for mass murder, then we won't offer them asylum, naturally."

"I didn't think so."

There'd be no advantage to harboring criminals like those.

"In reality, most of them are wanted for political crimes. I hear that our course teacher is a wanted heretic."

A heretic? She sounds dangerous.

"Our teacher was a Kulati holy woman who was forced into exile about three years ago."

Wow. How does Myalo know all this stuff? Like, where does he learn these things?



The woman simply entered the room and walked over to the teacher's podium like any teacher might.

If this was a Kulati, then they weren't so different from Shanti after all. She looked about thirty, and her skin was darker than I'd ever seen among the pale-skinned Shanti. Her long black hair was tucked behind her ears, as if she wanted to show them off. They were unlike Shanti ears—the outside and lobes were round and full, just like humans' back in my previous life. Of course, there was no hair growing from them either. She looked a little taller than the average Shanti woman, but that wasn't necessarily a Kulati trait. That could've been down to individual differences.

All in all, she looked like an ordinary human—something I hadn't seen in over ten years. At the very least, she was closer to the humans of my past life than the Shanti were.

While I hadn't expected a horned beast to come walking out, I'd assumed there had to be some major difference in appearance given that Shanti and Kulati people were so biologically distant that we couldn't produce children together. But she was entirely human. I found it hard to believe that our races weren't capable of interbreeding. If our species were classified in terms of taxonomy, we couldn't be further apart than subspecies. So what was stopping us?

Her appearance gave me the impression that she was more intellectual than the average Shanti, but that was down to her wearing glasses, rather than her

Kulati facial structure. Ordinary glasses weren't worn in this kingdom; the vision aids used here looked more like magnifying glasses. It was the first time I'd seen anyone in this world wearing glasses shaped to rest on the ears and the bridge of the nose.

"My name is Ether Vino," she said with a bow. "As you can see, I'm a Kulati. Her Majesty has given me leave to lecture at this academy, and I'm grateful to be here."

Her intonation was a little unusual, as if she was unaccustomed to speaking Shanish. But her grammar was perfect, and her sentences were completely natural. The fact that she still struggled with intonation suggested that the pronunciations used in Kulatish and Shanish were very different.

"Now... To begin, please allow me to explain two very important points related to this course."

I wonder what.

"The first thing you must be aware of is that the Kulatish I'm teaching is not spoken in every Kulati nation. The language I'll be teaching during this course is more accurately known as Terolish."



I'd already guessed as much. We tended to think of this world as being split into Shanti and Kulati, but they probably didn't see it that way. To them, the Shanti were no more than a different race that lived in just one of the countless regions of the world—a rather remote region, at that.

I'd asked my aunt Satsuki about it previously, and she'd told me that even in the days of the Shantila Empire when the Shanti were most numerous, we'd never encountered a third race besides the Shanti and Kulati. That meant that at the very least, all regions of Eurasia besides Shiyalta and Kilhina were inhabited by the Kulati.

In fact, I would've been *more* surprised if I'd been told that there was a single language spoken across the entirety of Eurasia.

"So please don't think that you'll be understood by everyone in the world just because you've learned Terolish. However, of the dozens of different languages spoken by Kulati, Terolish is the most widely understood. It's also the language spoken in the regions that surround the Shanti kingdoms. And if you do enter a non-Terolish-speaking region, you'll still be able to find speakers there who you can talk to. In other words, this is without a doubt the most ideal Kulati language for you to learn."

So it's kind of like English in my past life. Or maybe not. In a society with this level of technology, it's unlikely that there's much movement across borders, so the concept of an international language might be deceptive. Unfortunately, there are probably limits to how widely it's spoken.

"Now... This is the second thing you must be aware of. Terolish—or Kulatish, rather—is difficult to learn. Kulatish can't be mastered in the one-year span of this course. It would be different if learning the language was your sole pursuit for that entire year, but I expect you'll need five years if you're learning other topics at the same time. Regardless, I've been given just a single weekly slot in which to hold lectures, so I can only award you with a maximum of four credits."

We all listened silently to her explanation.

"That is to say, in order to learn Kulatish well enough to earn credits, you'll have to work five times as hard as you would to gain those same credits from

another subject. Since that's incredibly unfair, I'll also award credits to those struggling with the language. But even so, you'll still have to work twice as hard as in other classes."

Hmm... Getting just a single lecture course's worth of credits for a major undertaking like learning a foreign language is a little harsh.

"As much as I hate to say it, I must advise anyone who's put off by this information to transfer to another course. I will, of course, make an earnest effort to help those who remain learn Kulatish, even outside of the allotted lecture time."

Ordinarily, I'd have expected the course to be separated into elementary, intermediate, and advanced modules, with twenty credits or so awarded altogether. At least then there'd be more people willing to give it a go.

And I doubted "five years" was a good estimate for how long it would take to master a foreign language with just one lecture a week. It was too optimistic.

I'd studied English all through middle school, high school, and then college in my past life, but I'd still struggled with it. I'd spoken it well enough to travel overseas without any problems, and given enough time, I had even been able to write an article in English, but I'd never been good enough to talk to other researchers or specialists because I always had issues with intonation.

"I'd like to begin the lecture now. First, I'll explain the fundamental differences between Kulatish and Shanish. My own Shanish isn't perfect, so please speak up whenever you don't understand me."

The lecture then began. It felt like a waste, but she wrote the important points on a piece of parchment. The academy's blackboards were poorly made and cumbersome to use.

I knew that everything I'd learned by studying English would be useful in this course. The form of Kulatish known as Terolish was a subject-verb-object language, just like English. Shanish, much like Japanese, was a subject-object-verb language. In other words, Terolish and Shanish were as dissimilar as English was to Japanese.

There was also a difference in how the two languages employed accents. That

wouldn't be a problem while we were simply learning the grammar, but the difference would definitely cause a headache later. Once someone had gotten used to a language where a pitch accent formed part of the pronunciation of individual words, it was hard to adapt to a language that used a stress accent instead. The latter emphasized certain sounds in combination with other sounds. If even just one aspect of the language was the same—either its grammatical structure or its accent—then getting used to the other wouldn't be so hard. Since both were different, it created a barrier.

Myalo looked stunned when Ms. Ether actually spoke to us in Kulatish. Harol, on the other hand, appeared relatively calm. He'd probably had many opportunities to hear pirates talking during his work as a trader.

The lecture finished when the bell rang to signal the end of the period.

"That concludes today's lecture. I look forward to teaching you for the rest of the year." Ms. Ether bowed to us and then left the room.

Hmmm... First, I'll need something for writing down vocabulary. But what should I use?

I looked to my side and saw Myalo with a vacant look on his face. Maybe it was my imagination, but he looked badly shaken by the whole thing.

"Myalo, what's wrong?" I asked out of concern.

"I'm...not sure I can do this," he said softly.

"O-Oh."

Some people were much better at learning languages than others. I'd known people who were bad at all school subjects except languages. They'd managed to pass the Eiken Grade 1 English exam—showing great proficiency in the language—in their second year of middle school. There were even some who'd attended school overseas. There was no harm in learning a new language, but there was no need to struggle with a subject that wasn't compulsory either. Ms. Ether had been right to warn us.

"It's like listening to an octopus talk," Myalo added.

Listening to an octopus talk? He must be in shock.

Languages weren't exactly my forte either, so I had my own doubts about how well I'd fare on the course.

Hmmm... Well, I've got plenty of time. I'll see how it goes.

II

Ah, it's that dream again, I thought.

Even in the dream, I felt a sinking feeling.

It was the day a certain news article had caught my eye while I'd been browsing websites. It was a common sort of article from a financial newspaper for investors; it spoke about a new product that'd been developed in a particular industry.

The new product was a solar panel that used new technology with a patent pending, and the manufacturer claimed that improvements in the solar cells had increased the power conversion efficiency, while a treatment applied to the panel's surface film simultaneously improved weather resistance.

It sent a shiver down my spine. I immediately contacted the patent office to ask for more details. The entire time, I felt like I was at god's mercy. When a reply came, it confirmed that such a patent had indeed been filed. It was all based on the same idea that had come to me as a stroke of genius (in my own judgment) before becoming the subject of my research. A corporation had beaten me to the punch.

Back then I was a run-of-the-mill researcher, working sluggishly in a postdoctoral position.

I was finished. At the time, I'd been planning to patent it myself in the hopes that a major manufacturer might hire me when I offered them the rights.

The shock of my idea being patented by someone else reduced me to a shadow of my former self. I was still walking through life like a zombie when my vacation ended and I returned to the lab.

When I got there, I found my computer missing.

"Sorry. So-and-so spilled water on your PC while you were gone. We're

getting it fixed,” the professor explained.

So-and-so was an older postdoc who was thirty-five and unusually timid.

It was then that I guessed what had happened. Something about the way the professor had spoken sounded awfully fake. He was an accomplished researcher, but not the best actor.

For a moment, my mind went blank. A moment later, I felt hot—as if oxidation reactions were happening in every one of my brain cells at once. To put it another way, I was boiling with rage.

“Ahh... I see. Sounds like I can’t do much here today,” I managed to mutter.

“Sorry about that.”

“No worries. Please tell so-and-so he doesn’t need to worry about it either. I wouldn’t want him to feel bad.”

I knew that the corporation that beat me to the patent often sent employees to this very lab. I hadn’t thought much of it—it’s a small world, after all—but now that my computer was missing, I could easily put two and two together.

I might’ve swallowed the lie if my computer was a laptop, but the idea of a desktop PC breaking because someone spilled water on it was far-fetched. Unless someone had stuck a hose into the intake fan, a little water wasn’t going to break the machine. Wiping it with a cloth would’ve sufficed, along with maybe leaving the power unplugged so it could dry out while I was gone. Sending it for repairs without informing the owner, however, was not normal behavior.

But I still couldn’t be certain that my research had been stolen. Kicking up a fuss without any evidence would result in being thrown out of my job in disgrace, whether I was in the right or not. Postdoctoral researchers were a dime a dozen, after all.

Stay calm. Stay calm, I kept telling myself as I searched my desk.

Although researchers at the university would keep their research data on computers they’d been given, the machines were all connected to a server that would periodically store backups. If my research really had been stolen, then

the data would be completely erased when I got it back—both from the computer's SSD and from the server. That meant that there'd be no evidence left to prove the research was mine. Obviously, someone like me couldn't erase things from the backup server, but a professor might've had administrative access.

However, I'd also made my own backups by connecting a small, external SSD drive via USB.

In the past, I'd had an older research PC with an HDD that had died on me. I'd also completely forgotten my password to access the backup server, and—as luck would have it—the server admin had been in the hospital with appendicitis. That meant it had taken about a week before I was able to get my data back, and my research had been held up the whole time.

Ever since then, I'd kept regular backups on the external SSD drive—a modest old thing I'd salvaged from a broken laptop—without having to worry about any security problems. That external SSD should've still been in my desk drawer, sitting in its USB hub.

And, as it turned out, there it was. Luckily, it had been overlooked because it wasn't something that connected directly to my PC. *Thank god.*

"I had an idea while I was on vacation. I was thinking about going to the library to look into it. Is there anything urgent you need me around for?" I asked the professor.

Any other time, the professor would've made me do something, no matter how small, but today he simply said, "Yeah, sure." Perhaps he felt guilty.

"All right, I'll see you later."

With that, I exited the lab.

A week later I'd filed a lawsuit against the school and the corporation. I'd scraped together the little money I had and hired a private investigator. Then, I'd used a recording device to collect some statements from a few people—all who played dumb. We also managed to find out that an unexplained consulting fee had been paid to the professor from the corporation. After consulting a lawyer, I filed the lawsuit.

Ordinarily, I would've had little chance of winning the case in court. The thieves could claim that they'd developed the technology independently, and finding evidence that suggested otherwise would be difficult. But I was fortunate in that the corporation had made a big mistake—the data accompanying their patent filing included experimental data that was identical to my own results.

The same experiment will generally produce similar results each time, but not in the decimal values beyond the margin of error; all the more so when their experiments were supposedly performed in a different lab with different pieces of equipment.

The corporation had told me I wouldn't get a single penny, but now they saw that they had been beaten.

In the end, I didn't actually win, but I didn't lose either. We reached a settlement. The university and corporation both offered separate settlement fees, and I accepted their offers.

The sum was about equal to what a Japanese salaryman might get after working for half his life. It wasn't enough for me to live a life of leisure, but it would allow me to live comfortably for quite some time.

I could've insisted that they give me the patent, but that would expire after just twenty years, and it wouldn't have made me enough money to retire early. It wasn't always easy for an individual to collect fees owed to them when others used their patent, so the deal I got was good enough.

Unfortunately, society was cold toward me once I'd lost my job. My girlfriend was particularly harsh, for example.

When she came to my house to gather up the things she'd left here, she scolded me. "What are you good for now that you haven't got your research? You're no fun, you're boring, and your life's a mess."

I couldn't even disagree with her—I felt exactly the same way. I *was* difficult and boring. Plus, I had no one to call a friend. And now that I was officially unemployed—I'd lost my job over the dispute with the lab—it was fair to say my life was a mess. Even so, it hurt to know that other people saw me that way.

“Sounds like we’re through, then,” I said.

“We are. It’ll be a weight off my shoulders.”

Part of me knew that she was right, but another part was furious. She seemed to think she could hurt my feelings to her heart’s content, as if I was some stop on a vacation that she’d never need to think of again. I thought to myself that if human kindness even existed at all, then no other woman could be as unkind as her.

I thought I’d actually struck some luck with women for the first time in my life, but this was the reality. She’d probably misjudged me after she’d learned that I was a researcher at a famous university. She must’ve assumed that I had good prospects—that I’d be a professor some day.

Unfortunately, the prospects of postdoctoral researchers weren’t guaranteed. Without some big results from their personal research, they wouldn’t even land a position lecturing at some third-rate university. The university would’ve thrown me out into the cold sooner or later.

I’d initially thought she was a good woman for being willing to stick by me despite all that, but that had been my own stupid misunderstanding.

“‘A weight off’?” I echoed. “Bet you didn’t know that my settlement fee means that I can retire for life. Looks like I’ll be spending it all on myself. I might even go traveling while I put all this behind me.”

She hadn’t heard about the settlement fee. She looked stunned. I pushed her out of the apartment and closed the door behind her.

I felt a sense of satisfaction at first, but it soon soured. I was a petty man who delighted in using childish lies to make himself look big—I was no better than she was.

I pounded my fist against the wall, feeling like I’d hit rock bottom. My mood only worsened when I punched a hole through the cheap wall, and I scolded myself for being so stupid.

I decided that I really *would* take that trip.

I loaded some clothes, a tent, and a sleeping bag onto my beloved 250cc

motorcycle and set off that same day. Without a destination in mind, I drove to Niigata and then took a ferry to Hokkaido on a whim.

I was away for three weeks. My trip didn't end because I'd grown homesick or anything like that. I'd suddenly lost all interest in the very idea of traveling the country. As beautiful as Hokkaido was, I felt a constant, nagging sense of unease as I drove through Japan.

I canceled the lease on my apartment near the university and moved into a detached house that I'd inherited from my late grandfather. I didn't even unpack—my new job was backpacking.

I boarded a courier flight from Haneda that took me to Taoyuan in Taiwan, then began traveling from there. I wandered here and there, trying to recapture something lost from the days of my youth.

From Taiwan I crossed the sea to China. From India, I traveled to Israel. And, after visiting Istanbul, I went all the way to Spain. From there, I flew to America. Finally, I returned to Japan from the Los Angeles International Airport.

I'd been gone for a year, traveling the world and seeing everything I'd hoped to see. The trip had left me satisfied, but now I had nothing left to do.

From then on, I spent my days immersed in the world of the internet, games, and books, letting myself quietly decay like some forgotten vegetable in the refrigerator.



I woke up looking up at the dorm room ceiling.

It was just a dream...

I looked at one of my palms just to check. It was small and white, not a yellow-toned, adult-sized hand.

Phew...

I got out of bed and noticed that my clothes were sticking to my sweaty skin uncomfortably.

“Are you all right? You were having a bad dream.”

I heard a voice beside me. I turned to see Carol.

Suddenly I was fully awake. I'd gone pale, even. "What are you doing here?"

"This is my bed."

Ah, yeah, they did tell me about that...

The third roommate was Princess Carol. When I'd first heard the news, I'd thought, *Oh, so they gave her a room just in case? I doubt she'll ever use it. That means more space for me.* But now I had to wonder what the people in the castle were thinking when they put her in a room with two boys. They had to be idiots.

Carol hadn't been there the night before, and Dolla had gone back to his parents' place, so I'd been alone when I'd gone to sleep. That had to have meant that Carol either got here in the middle of the night, or earlier in the morning.

Carol was wearing white, pajama-like top and bottoms. She calmly sat on her bed with her legs crossed, as if this was the most natural place for her to be.

Then again, that *was* her bed, so maybe it *was* the most natural place for her to be. But it was still dangerous—there really wasn't anything natural about it at all.

Why didn't anyone step in to stop her? Do they really think that Dolla and I won't pose a threat? I wondered.

But maybe the concept wasn't so crazy. Before I'd fought with Dolla, I'd had a reputation for being calm and collected, and I was the top student too. Dolla might've been an unruly brat, but he was still the son of an officer of the royal guard. His meathead personality cast some doubt on that, but maybe they hadn't actually looked into what sort of person he was. Maybe they did decide that he and I were the safest roommates for her.

Myalo had said that the top five students were always in different rooms, but rules like that would quickly get scrapped if Carol's safety was at stake.

I looked outside and saw the faint light that preceded the dawn.

Carol, still sitting cross-legged on the bed, suddenly asked, "What sort of

dream was it anyway?”

“A dream about going traveling because a woman dumped me,” I answered honestly.

“What? Do men go traveling when women dump them?” Carol asked incredulously.

Taking a solitary trip to get over heartbreak probably wasn’t common practice in this kingdom. At least, I’d never heard of anyone doing it.

“Well, it wasn’t just that she dumped me. I’d gotten fired from my job, so she cast me aside like I was worthless. So I went traveling while feeling empty inside.”

“Hmpf... I don’t get it.”

Our cultures must’ve been too different. For me, it sounded like a classic setup for a story—someone out on the road, tears in their eyes, after they’d lost almost everything.

“I know you’d be sad to lose your job, but why was getting dumped such a shock?”

“Well...we were a couple. Of course it’s a shock.”

“Really? Wouldn’t you just be relieved?”

“Why relieved?”

Are people glad when women dump them in this country? That would be a culture beyond my understanding.

“Because a woman like that is trash,” Carol declared ruthlessly.

Trash?

Long ago, I’d thought the same thing in anger; especially when I was in Hokkaido and received an email about how she had rights to half of everything I owned because we’d been common law married.

“You can’t call her that for walking out on a man with no job.”

“Hm? That’s not what I meant.”

Huh? Then what does she mean?

“By trash, I mean the type of man I’d immediately rule out as a potential husband. I know we’re talking about a woman here, but it’s basically the same thing.”

I don’t get it. Maybe the insult has some sort of special definition in her mind.

“My mother said that any man who wishes to marry me for something other than my personality is worthless,” Carol said proudly.

“Really?”

As always, I couldn’t understand what Carol was so proud of. I’d also just learned that Her Majesty didn’t mince her words. I dreaded the day she granted me an audience, only to look down on me and declare, “You’re the lowest of the low—you’re worthless.”

“Do you know why that is?” Carol asked.

“No idea.”

“Oh? You don’t?”

What are you so smug about? How should I know the reason behind your family’s teachings?

“A man like that might be attractive and hold a high office, but I’d lose his heart the moment the thing that draws him in vanishes. He’d betray a woman who loses his heart. A man like that isn’t fit to be my husband.”

Ugh... This is getting to me. Why do I feel like she’s attacking my character? She’s not even talking about me, but I feel like she’s implying something.

“But that wouldn’t happen if they marry me for my personality. Even if I lost my royal status, I’d still be me. As long as I don’t turn into trash myself, I’d never have to worry about being betrayed.”

Such a clear and concise analysis.

“Well, you’re right about that.”

There’s a grain of truth in there. Maybe a hundred grains even.

“But that’s easier said than done,” Carol continued. “They say that a man

often looks at the face and the body when what he truly loves is the soul.”

She nodded her head repeatedly in satisfaction. I doubted she really understood what she was saying.

“But that’s a really weird dream you had. You don’t even have a girlfriend, so why’re you dreaming about some awful woman wasting your time and dumping you? Did you read something like that in a novel?”

I decided I’d let her believe that. “Good guess.”

“Heh.”

Why’s she looking so smug again? Is it because she guessed correctly? It’s like she thinks she’s got me all figured out.

“Anyway, what are you doing here? I know they assigned you a bed, but this is no way for an unmarried woman to behave.”

What if one of the dorm’s dirty brats lays his hands on her? Maybe it won’t happen right now, but give them a few years and they’ll be a real threat.

“I’m tired of everyone saying that.”

She looked at me in disbelief. Apparently, others had already warned her repeatedly.

“There’s no point in attending the Knight Academy if I can’t deepen my friendships with the future knights.”

“You can deepen your friendships at the Cultural Academy.”

“I’m already doing that. I’m sick of being told to stay over there. This place is more important to me.”

She wasn’t just entering the Knight Academy for the sake of showing off. Although this country wasn’t in as dire a predicament as the Kilhina Kingdom just yet, she wasn’t wrong to place a great importance on this faction of the academy.

“Oh, really. Well, do your best. I’m going to go wash my face,” I told her.

“Be ready for a game when you’re done.”

Huh? Game?

“Game? What do you mean?”

“A game of togi, of course.”

Ah, she’s talking about togi. She brought it up out of nowhere, so I was confused. But what does she mean by “of course”? Since when did we decide to play? It’s a mystery to me.

“Why me?”

“General opinion in the dorm is that you’re the best player. I’ve come to end your reign.”

She has way too much time on her hands. Not that I mind playing with her.

“All right, sure. Are you one of those people who’s super into togi?”

“Yeah, I like it. Love it, in fact.”

“I see.”

I wasn’t sure why, but something about her reminded me of Rook. Though it could’ve been my imagination.

Chapter 2 — Sham Enters the Academy

I

Now that I was ten, it was time for me to enter school too. I'd be attending the Cultural Academy.

I shouldn't have needed to go there since I already had a teacher, but for some reason I was being forced to go anyway. I hated the idea.

The Cultural Academy was a school on the same grounds as the Knight Academy that Yuri attended, and the Grand Library that I often visited was one of its facilities. It wasn't exactly the same school as Yuri's, but I'd been told that half of what we were taught would be the same.

There was some sort of exam to decide our classes before I started at the academy. I'd gone there a few days before the term began to take the test. Just like all the other students there, I wore my school uniform and answered the same questions.

The test was full of things that my mom had been teaching me since I was younger, while the subjects that I actually found interesting barely appeared at all. Even when I did come across such a question, it was always elementary level.

Since all the questions appeared on the same test, most people must've considered the questions to be similar in terms of difficulty. I, however, had such a meager knowledge of some of the topics that I struggled to understand certain questions, while others were topics I understood in far greater detail than needed.

My mom and dad had often told me that I was exceptionally intelligent. But based on the test questions, I had to conclude that the academy was a place for learning subjects that I was bad at, or at least, wasn't even remotely interested in. I became less willing to study there by the second.

The day after the test, I attended an admission ceremony. We were seated by order of how well we'd done on the test. I was placed somewhere in the middle.

I wasn't ashamed of my position because there'd been a lot of questions that I really hadn't understood. If the exam had been all math, I would've cried tears of frustration at my grade. It made me realize just how little interest I had in topics besides math and natural science. In other words, I wasn't upset about losing because I had no desire to win.

Yuri and my mom were seated in the family area.

During the ceremony, people with various titles gave speeches. We were told about the future prospects of students, that the future of the kingdom was placed on our backs, *etc.* I understood the meanings of the words, but the overall message was lost on me.

I was trying to remember something Yuri had taught me the day before. If we were to consider a planet with no atmosphere—i.e., a planet where we could apply a simple model of physics that disregarded the effects of atmospheric drag and compressive heating—then we would find that if a person were to stand on the planet's surface and throw a pebble horizontally at a particular speed, the pebble would travel around the planet before hitting the person on the back of the head. However, if the person were to dodge the pebble, it would continue to circle the planet endlessly. Thus, that would make it a satellite, similar to the moon.

Celestial mechanics was such a beautiful field. Its complex laws were in harmony, and they could be refined into a correct form prescribed by nature itself. They weren't the imperfect laws of limited scope that humans tended to create, they were the science behind the interplay of forces governing the stars themselves. It all fell within the limits of human understanding. Through the correct application of the language of mathematics, we could understand the very universe. It baffled me that few people made any effort to understand something so wonderful for themselves.

When I glanced over at Yuri, our eyes met and he waved at me. I couldn't help but smile, knowing that the one person in this world who understood me was

so close.

I hadn't been able to see Yuri very often after he'd started at the Knight Academy a year ago. At least now I'd have a few more opportunities. The prospect made me think joining the academy might not be so bad after all.

But even the year-long absence hadn't been so bad. We hadn't been together, but we weren't very far apart. I'd spent our time separated wracking my brain until I'd reached an impasse. Then, whenever Yuri had been able to come home, I'd have a question for him. He'd smile and tell me I'd asked a good question before patting me on the head. Getting that kind of recognition always gave me a sense of happiness—something almost like an itch or a tickling sensation—that filled me completely.

Then he would give me the tools I needed to break through the barrier in my path each and every time. It felt like we were making up for lost time, and I stopped feeling lonely.

The people on the stage kept talking, but I had no idea what was so interesting about it, what any of it meant, or what I was supposed to learn from it. Then a pair of students—one male, one female—took to the stage to make some sort of pledge which involved kissing Her Majesty's hand.

Mom had told me about this. She said that it was a great honor to go up on stage, and that Yuri had done it the year before. She'd told me to work hard too, but here I was in the middle, far away from the top position.

I couldn't live up to my mom's expectations, but that was fine. Yuri was always there to praise me instead.



By the time the ceremony had finally finished, I felt like I couldn't spend another minute listening to meaningless speeches.

I remained in my seat, overcome with a horrible feeling of exhaustion. Suddenly, Yuri appeared and extended his hand to me.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

After a pause, I answered, "Yes."

I took Yuri's hand and rose from my seat.

"The dorm comes next, doesn't it?" I asked.

"There's time for lunch before that. We've got a reservation somewhere."

Sounds like I've got some time before I visit the dorm.

My new living arrangements were yet another horrible thing that I had to go along with. I couldn't imagine having to share a room with a stranger.

Even Yuri had problems with it. I remembered that this time last year, he'd returned home because he'd been given a room with a violent philistine and he'd been kicked out after they'd fought.

"Will I be all right, Yuri?" The memory made me worry, so I couldn't help but ask.

"What do you mean?"

"If my roommate starts a fight with me like yours did, I don't know what I'm going to do."

"Bwah ha... Ha ha ha... Gwah hah..." Yuri guffawed.

I had no idea what was so funny. Yuri gripped his stomach and laughed so hard that everyone around him started to look at us. He even had to cover his mouth to stop himself...and then his nose too. He couldn't even breathe.

I'd never seen Yuri act like that before.

"Heh... Yuri, it's not a laughing matter," I said, chortling a little myself because his laugh was infectious.

"Haah... Haah... Phew. Calm down. It's not that funny. It's not that funny..." Yuri said to himself as he got his breath back. "Ha hah..."

"You're awful. I'm seriously worried here."

"Pfft... You're fine. Hah... Idiots like him...don't go to the Cultural Academy. Even at the Knight Academy, hardly anyone's as stupid as he is."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah, that's right. You'll find a guy like him at the Cultural Academy when

pigs fly. A creature like him has zero chance of survival in their habitat. Don't you worry."

Oh, I see. So in other words, I don't need to worry because we're living in different worlds. Maybe I can relax.



I left the royal castle with Yuri escorting me, and we boarded a carriage that took us to a restaurant.

We had a table in a private room somewhere very fancy. As soon as I took my seat, the servers told us they'd soon bring out our meal. They must've known that we were coming.

The food had a new, delicious flavor that was unlike anything I was used to at home, and I gobbled it down. I'd been very hungry, so now I felt ravenous.

I realized that my mom was staring silently at me.

"What?" I asked.

"I'm wondering whether you'll be okay." She gave me a look of concern and put her hand to my cheek.

"Why?"

She simply heaved a great sigh in response.

What'd I do?

Yuri came to my aid. "Oh, her table manners aren't all that bad."

Apparently, the issue was the way I was eating. Still, I wasn't acting any differently than normal.

"But, you know..." Satsuki began.

"Let's leave her be. It's not like she has to get along with the stuck-up witches at the academy."

Now I didn't understand what Yuri was saying.

"But still..."

"Are you worried about bullying?"

“Maybe. I suppose I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t.”

Bullying...? I don’t know what that is.

Long ago, when I’d pulled the tail of our cat back home, I’d been told not to bully it. Maybe they worried I’d do the same thing again at the academy. Their concern wasn’t necessary—I’d learned my lesson well enough after the cat had scratched me.

“I forgot to mention, but I’ve asked Her Highness to look after Sham.”

“What? You mean Princess Carol?”

“Don’t worry, it won’t put us in her debt. I’ve agreed to do a favor for her in return.”

“Oh, I wasn’t worried about anything like that.”

“For all her flaws, Her Highness is capable of handling any problems at the Cultural Academy. She’ll be a big help, I’m sure.”

“I hope so. I feel I can stop worrying now. Thanks for looking out for her, Yuri.”

All I understood was that Yuri had asked someone for a favor that involved me.

Is she going to be my roommate? If Yuri’s chosen her, I’ll feel a lot better.



After spending a little time back at the house, Yuri and I headed back toward the academy in a carriage for just the two of us.

I still felt unbearably anxious. I tried sharing my worries with Yuri several times in the carriage, but each time he just told me, “It’ll be all right.”

When we returned to the school, there were numerous other carriages parked close to us. Other children my age, who wore brand-new uniforms just like mine, got out of their rides.

The thought of entering the dorm still made me feel terrible inside.

“You’re late,” a girl suddenly said to us.

She was tall, and her long hair was a beautiful pale yellow. It made me think of a field of wheat rippling in the wind. Looking into her blue eyes was like staring into a deep sea. She was so pretty, and she also had a dignified air about her as she stood in front of us with a bold posture. Since she was wearing the same uniform as me, she had to be one of my seniors.

“We had dinner with her mom and then things went on longer than expected. They are sort of parting ways today, after all,” Yuri explained.

“Well...that’s fine then,” the girl replied.

The two seemed very close. She had to be one of Yuri’s friends.

“Hello, Yuri,” another figure beside the blonde girl spoke up.

He wore the same uniform as Yuri, but he was incredibly slender. His mannerisms were very gentle too. I’d initially mistaken him for a girl when I’d seen his pretty face, but since he had short hair and a boy’s uniform, I knew that couldn’t be the case. The only boys I’d ever seen in the Ho family’s territory were fighters and soldiers, so it was refreshing to see someone like him.

“What are you doing here?” Yuri asked the boy, narrowing his eyes a little.

“I heard that your cousin was here at the academy. I just had to see her for myself,” the boy replied.

“Nothing escapes you, does it?”

“And this must be her.”

“That’s right.”

I bowed my head and greeted him. “I’m Sha-Sham. Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too. My name’s Myalo.”

“Nice to meet you.”

I was so nervous that I’d said “nice to meet you” a second time before I could stop myself. How embarrassing. Now he probably thought I was weird.

But Myalo simply smiled at me as if I hadn’t just done something unusual.

“Myalo’s just here to gawk at you, Sham,” Yuri said. “Ignore him.”

“How mean,” Myalo replied.

Although Yuri had just said something really harsh, Myalo looked pleased for some reason. It was like he was happy that Yuri didn’t feel the need to mince words around him. That must’ve been how their friendship worked.

“This is the person I want to introduce you to, Sham.” Yuri gestured toward the girl.

“I’m Carol. Nice to meet you.” The girl—Carol—reached out to shake my hand.

When I took her hand in mine, it was delicate and slender, but her palm was coarse. I could feel several hardened calluses that were almost uncomfortable against my own palm. They were like Yuri’s hands—the hands of someone who trained with a spear every day.

“Nice to meet you. My name is Sham.”

“Sham, is it? You’re a lot cuter than your cousin and way less difficult. I can already tell I’ll get on much better with you.”

“Was that a jab at me?”

Yuri *said* that, but he didn’t seem bothered by it at all. If anything, he appeared amused. It was interesting. The way he acted toward these two was completely different from how he acted toward me and other members of our family. It was like he didn’t have to worry about saying the wrong thing.

Is this what people mean when they talk about friends? I don’t know if I can make friends like these.

“I’m not kidding. She really is a cute little thing.” Carol kept her grip on my hand and squeezed a little tighter while using her free hand to stroke my hair.

I’m a little thing?

When I recalled the children who’d been sitting near me at the admission ceremony, I got the feeling they were a lot taller than me despite being the same age.

But that’s no reason to pet my head so much. She won’t stop.

“That’s enough,” Yuri said. “Sham’s not a cat.”

“Ah... Yeah.” Carol took her hand away from my head.

Now Yuri started touching my head. He quickly fixed my messy hair, tucking strands back in their place. It tickled a little. Once my hair was tidy again, he gave Carol a pat on the shoulder. “Take good care of her.”

“Got it,” Carol replied. “And you know what you have to do for me in return, right?”

“I didn’t forget. I hate the idea of not being the only rider, but a promise is a promise.”

“Heh heh. I’m getting that ride, no matter what.”

“Be good to Her Highness,” Myalo said.

“I’ll leave it to you,” Yuri told Carol.

“You can count on me.” Carol took my hand.

Yuri then turned away. He was about to walk off and leave me right there.

“Aren’t you coming with us, Yuri?” I asked him.

“Huh? They’d hang me if I went.”

Huh? H-Hang him?

“They don’t allow boys in the White Birch Dormitory, Sham,” Myalo explained.

The color drained from my face.

Yuri can’t come in? Then how will I ever see him?

I knew we wouldn’t live in the same building like we had back at Ho Province, but I’d thought we could at least visit each other’s dorms.

“There’s no need to worry. I’ll be with you,” Carol said.

That’s no consolation at all...



After I parted with Yuri, Carol took me by the hand and led me to a large

building. It was like a mountain of bricks and stone, with many windows along its walls. It might've been even bigger than the manor back at Ho Province. If *this* was a dormitory, then I couldn't even imagine how many students lived in it.

With Carol still holding my hand, we weaved through a path that bustled with other people.

"Good day to you, Lady Carol."

Every single person we passed along the way gave the exact same greeting and a bow. I wondered whether it was a rule that everyone had to say this when they encountered someone.

There were others nearby who also exchanged that same greeting, but it seemed that everyone said it to Carol just because she walked by. It felt strange.

A very long time ago, back when my dad was still alive, the guards and servants would greet us in a similar way whenever we returned home. Though they had said things like "thank you for your service," and "welcome home." Rook and my mom received similar greetings now. Although it was different from "good day to you," it felt the same. It was as though Carol was the master of the dormitory.

But there were many older students, and even adults, who were much bigger than Carol. The students wore the same clothes as us. Sure, the sizes varied due to the age differences, but they were the same nonetheless. Still, even they leaned forward to bow and repeat the greeting to Carol.

Carol would respond to it all with things like "hi," and "good morning." It was incredible.

"While you're living here, you just need to say 'good day to you,' like everyone else is doing," Carol said.

So I just have to repeat after them.

"Okay."

I'd never heard the phrase before today, so it was probably unique to the

people of the dorm.

Good day to you. It's a lot longer than "hello." I might get worn out saying this over and over all day.

"Good day to you, Lady Carol."

I tried saying it once for practice, but Carol burst out laughing.

"Ha ha, that's it."

"Did I say it wrong?"

"No, you've got it right. I just thought it was funny to hear it coming from Yuri's cousin."

I don't understand why that makes it funny...

We continued on through the dorm's large doors and headed deeper inside to a wide-open room. It was an atrium where sunlight shone in from the ceiling above. It appeared to be cut into the very center of the building.

This area contained a green garden and even some white birch trees. Shrubs with vivid flowers grew at their roots. The flora was a beautiful sight within a world of stone.

In front of the garden was a large lobby-like area where people were gathered. A large sign made from a piece of wood was there.

"Excuse us, coming through," Carol said as we entered the crowd of people. They instantly parted to open up a path for us.

Wow. Carol really is someone special here.

"Hmmm. Where was it...? Ah, here we are," Carol muttered to herself as she continued to walk with my hand in hers.

We climbed several flights of stairs to reach the third floor. Finally, we stopped in front of a room.

"This'll be your room from today onward, Sham."

Carol knocked on the door.

"Come on in," a slow and lazy-sounding voice beckoned from inside.

Carol opened the door, and we entered. It was a small room—about the same size as mine back in our countryside manor—with a bunk bed, a closet, and two desks.

One of the desks was brand new and bare, while the other already had someone sitting at it. My roommate was surrounded by a jumble of stuff, piled as high as my workspace back home. My mom always nagged me to tidy it up.

“Lilly, this is the girl I told you about,” Carol said.

This person—Lilly—wore a thick apron over her uniform, and appeared a few years older than both me and Carol.

“Oh, okay. Well now, ain’t she cute?”

She remained sitting and spoke softly as she looked at me. Her voice had a slight dialect which suggested she was from across the mountains. She seemed like a gentle person. I much preferred her type over ruffians.

“I sure do hope we can get along,” she said, waving at me.

“It’s nice to meet you.” I bowed my head to her.

I felt I might get by just fine with someone like this. She didn’t scare me.

“And she’s awful polite too. You sure do exaggerate, Your Highness. You had me worried.”

Lilly appeared relieved about something. She must’ve been wondering what sort of person I was. I’d shared similar anxieties about my potential roommate.

“I just met her today,” Carol said.

“That so? Then Yuri must’ve been the one who fussed over nothing.”

“Yeah. He kept telling me that this girl’s a genius several times smarter than him, and he was scared that some idiot would pollute her brain.”

Why would Yuri say that? Was he telling that to everyone? It’s not even true.

Yuri often told me that he was smarter because he’d lived a year longer than I had, but even in the three years since we’d met, I still wasn’t on the same level as he’d been on our first meeting. It felt like the gap between us was closer to a hundred years.



I was at a loss to explain why he'd say I was several times smarter than him. It was completely illogical to think I was smarter than he was.

"If you're smarter than Yuri, then you must be real special," Lilly added.

"It's not true at all," I replied.

"Well, thinkin' about it, it *is* hard to swallow. It'd be pretty bonkers if we had people like Yuri everywhere."

I was relieved that she believed me.

I'd never heard anyone call anything "bonkers" before. In fact, I was hearing a lot of new words and phrases today. *Good day to you. Bonkers.* I didn't know what they meant.

"One Yuri's enough for me. I'm glad Sham's not like him," Carol said.

"I dunno about that, but I sure like Sham."

"If you ever meet Yuri, you'll know what I mean. He's warped. The fact he's so talented just makes it even worse."

What a horrible way to put it. I don't know if she's trying to compliment or insult him, but there's nothing warped about Yuri at all.

"Our lectures never line up," Lilly said with a sigh.

"I hate to cut our conversation short, but Sham and I need to go. I still haven't shown her around the dorm," Carol said.

"You, Your Highness? You're not too busy?"

"I made a deal with him. I've got to keep up my side."

"Oh, I see. He must be awful special to you," Lilly said with a smile.

"He's not special, it's just that he came to me for help. He's never done that before."

Yuri forced Carol into looking after me? I feel a little bad.

"That's the kind of special I'm talkin' about."

"He's not special."

“You wouldn’t go this far just out of obligation, would you?”

“Stop being stupid. We’ve got a deal, that’s all.”

“Ohhh? What sort of deal?” Lilly sounded incredibly interested.

After a pause, Carol simply said, “We’re leaving.”

She then took my hand and dragged me out of the room.

“See you, Sham,” Lilly called out from inside the room.

After that, Carol took me up and down several flights of stairs as she showed me various places. There was a laundry room, a bathroom, a kitchen, a spring, a well, a store, and more.

Carol was the center of attention wherever we went, and everyone was ready to clear a path for her as she passed.

“This is the store. If you run out of food, you can always buy some desserts here. Though all they sell are these long-lived baked goods.”

“I’ll remember that.”

The men of the Ho family rarely ever ate desserts, and my mom didn’t care for them much either, so I’d had very little experience eating them. They must’ve had some special way of making them here, because they were really good. Unlike Ho Province, desserts were often served here in the royal capital. When I’d looked at the city streets earlier, I’d seen many tearooms that I guessed were popular with women.

I didn’t usually think about cultural anthropology, but seeing the cafés and tearooms made me wonder whether cities took on completely different forms when women ruled over them.

My mom had told me that the White Birch Dormitory was like a melting pot for women’s cultural ideas. I hoped I’d find a way to fit in.

Carol took me by the hand and led me to the next place.

“This is the dining hall. It’s a little small considering how many students there are, but the lunch bell rings at a different time on each floor so it doesn’t get too crowded.”

It looked more than big enough to me, but Carol considered it tiny.

“If you’re absolutely starving, you can come here earlier than you’re supposed to and no one will say anything.”

“All right.”

“If you want more detailed dorm rules, you can always ask Lilly.”

“I will.”

“Next, there’s, um... Oh, I guess that’s it. Let’s head back.”

“All right.”

She really has it together...

I was the eldest daughter of the Ho family, but since girls couldn’t become the head, I’d been given a lot of freedom throughout my childhood. Yuri had to keep himself together because he’d been chosen to inherit the family headship. But what was it that made Carol this way? I assumed she was the eldest daughter who’d be head of some household in the future.

As I wondered about Carol, we returned to my room hand in hand. Suddenly, someone appeared before us, blocking our way.

She was a girl, of course. I was just wondering whether she had business with Carol when she yelled, “My dear sister, what in the world do you think you’re doing?!”

The girl in front of me had very cute features and the same wheat-colored hair that Carol had. Sadly, her charm was spoiled by the fact that her face was bright red and her eyes full of tears.

I’d never seen her before, so I obviously couldn’t be the dear sister that she was talking to. Logic told me that this had to be Carol’s younger sibling.

Carol was the same age as Yuri, so the other girl had to be my age. She also must’ve just entered the academy. That seemed to make sense.

I glanced up at Carol and saw that she looked troubled. She must’ve wanted to avoid her little sister.

“I’m not doing anything,” Carol said.

“Then who’s she?!”

Carol’s sister pointed her finger at me. It felt like a rude thing to do, but I was already too overwhelmed to be offended by it.

“She’s my friend’s cousin.”

“I’m your own flesh and blood! What will people say if my own sister chooses to be another girl’s patron?!”

I had no idea what was going on, but whatever it was, the girl was very emotional about it. I’d never seen a stranger get so angry. It scared me.

“No one will say anything. You’re a princess. No one’s going to look down on you. Don’t worry over things like this.”

“You think it’s that simple?!”

“Yes, it is. In fact, I never had a patron of my own. A princess must forge her own path forwa—”

“No! No! No! You just don’t get it. I’m your *sister*!”

I don’t understand her... She’s...scaring me. What is she so mad about?

It sounded like she was annoyed because Carol didn’t do something she should’ve done. It might’ve been because of me, but it sounded like Carol had never planned to be her sister’s “patron” anyway.

“Since when did royal family members have patrons?” Carol asked in exasperation.

“Since always!”

“They haven’t.”

“Whether they have or haven’t, you’re shaming me regardless!”

Shame? I’m not sure what she’ll be embarrassed about, but I doubt it’s worth shouting over like this.

All the ruckus in the middle of the corridor had started to draw a crowd of people. Since I was caught up in the whole thing, it was hard for me to imagine what the onlookers made of this spectacle.

I couldn't see a single reason for her to feel ashamed. After all, she was beautiful with her freshly tailored uniform, her perfectly straight wheat-colored hair, and her adorable face. Everyone was bound to fall for her.

But if she went around lamenting, maybe people would start viewing her as pathetic.

As the crowd around us kept growing, I grew more and more uncomfortable. Carol noticed.

"Do you know the way back?" she asked quietly.

I quickly nodded back at her.

"Sorry that we didn't get to finish. Go back to your room."

"Okay."

I didn't want anything more to do with this incomprehensible situation. I hid myself behind Carol, then let myself blend in with the growing crowd.

Before long I'd made it back to my room. "Haah, haah..."

I checked the door number. It was the same as the one I'd taken note of when I'd left.

Given that this room was going to be half mine from now on, I assumed I could walk right in. But I decided to knock just to be safe after I'd taken a second to catch my breath.

"Come on in," came the response.

I turned the door knob and stepped inside.

"Oh, welcome back."

"N-Nice to see you again."

I felt a little awkward being welcomed home. It had been rare to have opportunities to be welcomed back by my family.

"Looks like you're alone. Did Carol go runnin' off someplace?"

"No, but we got into some trouble."

"Trouble?" Lilly knitted her brow a little. "I've never heard of anyone in White

Birch Dormitory causin' trouble for our princess..."

I gave her a brief summary of what had happened. The situation seemed to make sense to Lilly.

"Well, that figures. Even Her Highness can't shrug that off. That little sister of hers..."

"What's a patron?" I decided I should ask since that had seemed to be the root of the girl's anger.

"Well, to put it simply, it's someone older who takes care of a younger girl. You might say they're a mother or older sister figure to a girl while she's here. It pays to get someone popular as your patron—you get respect from everyone else, and no one'll dare bully you."

Now I understood. I'd thought that Carol was just giving me a tour since she was Yuri's friend, but it was more than that. Yuri must've asked her to take special care of me the whole time.

"Given that Her Highness might be our queen someday, you'd be awful lucky to have her as your patron. I reckon that's what her little sister wanted."

Carol's going to be the queen someday? No one told me.

Now it made sense that Carol was so well-put-together. I also remembered that my mom said something about royal family members having beautiful hair.

But wouldn't that mean that I've done something terrible to her sister?

The thought of her directing her anger toward me later sent an icy shiver down my spine.

"Don't you worry about it, Sham. It's a family matter."

"You're sure?"

"I doubt her sister'll give you any trouble, but if she does, you just come tell me. I can't do much, but at least I can talk to Her Highness."

"I will."

If anyone gets violent with me, I can go talk to Yuri too.

Lilly explained more about the dorm to me, then she asked, "What'll it be—

top bunk or bottom?”

“Which one were you using before I got here?”

“I lived in another room till now. Back there, I had the top bunk.”

“Oh, I see.”

The state of her desk had made me think she’d been living here a long time. I would’ve hated to take her spot.

“I don’t mind which I sleep on,” I said.

“No need to be shy. We can always switch places later.”

Hmm. But I really don’t care that much.

“I’ll take the top, in that case,” I said.

“Then that puts me on the bottom.”

Lilly sounded a little pleased, as if she’d secretly hoped to be there. I was glad about my choice.

I’d picked the top because it looked like a better place to lie and think about things. The idea of climbing a ladder seemed fun too.

Then we sat on our desk chairs and faced each other. The seat was quite comfortable, but a little too big for me. Lilly’s was just right for her, which meant I’d soon grow into them too. Someday. Probably.

“How about I introduce myself? The name’s Lilly Amian. I’m from a family of mechanics.”

“You’re a...mechanic?”

I’d thought only nobles could join the academy, but it turned out craftsmen could join too.

“My family may be mechanics, but we’re also our village’s head. You could call us a bunch of castaway, downfallen nobles,” Lilly explained, as if she’d sensed my surprise.

“Oh, I see.”

So she is a noble, after all. But I don’t understand what she means about her

family. Well, I guess I do understand the downfallen part, but not the castaway bit. Does that mean their territory keeps moving?

The Ho family had ruled over the same area for so long that it was hard for me to imagine a family whose territory kept changing.

“I’m awful fond of mechanical devices. I tinker with timepieces as a hobby. Take a look.”

Lilly gestured toward her desk. She’d set up something resembling a little workbench with lots of dainty metal parts on it.

This looks amazing.

I approached to see it better. There were cogwheels of various sizes along with other components on the desk. The smallest parts were stored inside something that looked like a makeup box with tiny compartments.

These are all clock components?

In the middle of her workbench was a clock with the panel removed. Unlike the pendulum one we had at home, this one was a portable device small enough to fit in someone’s palm—a pocket watch.

I’d seen my mom carrying one of these before, and it had immediately sparked my interest back then. But when I’d asked her if I could try taking it apart, the color had drained from her face, and she’d said, “No. Absolutely not.”

“It must be very delicate,” I said to Lilly.

“Sure is.”

“It’s amazing. I’d love to see how it works.” I never did learn how my mom’s had operated, and I’d been curious ever since.

“I don’t expect you’ll learn much by lookin’.”

“Can I take a peek, at least?”

“Sure thing,” Lilly agreed.

I examined the pocket watch closely and found that most of the parts were still in place. The face, hands, and the cogwheels that moved the hands had been removed and put in a little box nearby, but all the parts that made them

move were still assembled.

I already knew that it was possible to store energy inside a pocket watch like this one using a mainspring. The core workings of such a clock had to somehow release that energy in a useful way. If it simply came down to that, though, the mainspring would unleash a driving force the moment it was released, causing the hands on the clock to rotate rapidly before eventually coming to a halt. Getting a hand to move one-sixtieth across the face every second required some sort of pace setting mechanism that regulated the driving force.

With all that in mind, the way that the assemblage before me combined these numerous functions into such a logical and compact manner struck me as a thing of beauty.

Who thought up an arrangement like this? There must be some really smart people out there.

“Did you learn anythin’?” Lilly asked after a while.

“I can’t grasp the fine details, but I understand the overall mechanism.”

“R-Really?”

“Huh? Well...not all of it...”

Did she want me to understand the whole thing?

“Why don’t you tell me what you’ve figured out?”

I guess I’ll tell her.

“There’s a small spring used in the place of a pendulum that ensures the supply of driving force from the mainspring is isochronic. It’s a very interesting idea. I’d have never thought of using a spring that way.”

It was possible to make the clock move in a precise manner using a separate mechanism that, with a fixed rhythm, repeatedly halted the rotation that provided the driving force. In other clocks, the mechanism achieving this effect made use of the properties of a pendulum.

Lilly looked a little surprised. “Y-You can tell by lookin’? Have you seen this mechanism before?”

“No, but...I took a pendulum clock apart at home once.” I’d done so with Yuri.

“Sure, the mechanisms are the same...but you wouldn’t know by lookin’.”

“I’ve been thinking about the way clocks work anyway because I’m curious about them. A pendulum clock’s mechanism won’t function correctly if you change its orientation, so I couldn’t understand how any clock could maintain isochronism while being carried. It turns out they use the contraction of a spring.”

If someone bent a spring, then let go, it would oscillate back and forth. That movement was a periodic motion that could be considered isochronic. This delicate little mainspring likely made use of a similar mechanical property within the body of the clock. I could imagine engineers using repeated trial and error as they experimented with this excellent design before eventually settling on this particular arrangement. In a sense, this clock was a beautiful crystallization of the engineers’ findings.

Still, this clock lacked the permanence of the stars. Friction meant that it would always need oil, and even then, it still wouldn’t keep working forever. It was nothing more than a tool that informed people of the time. It was certainly beautiful and also very interesting, but I had no desire in devoting time to learning all of its secrets. It fell just outside of my true field of interest.

“Well, umm... Have you studied machines, Sham?” Lilly looked at me like she was confused.

“Not really.”

Back when Yuri and I had dismantled the clock, it was so he could teach me about a pendulum’s isochronism along with the principles of vectors. We knew we’d get in trouble if we were caught, so the two of us had secretly taken it apart late at night to look at its insides. Under the faint glow of a nightlight he explained to me how the pendulum’s vectors changed with its movement. You could say that I’d only learned the mechanism behind clocks incidentally.

“What have you studied?”

“I’m not sure you can really call it studying, but...math, celestial mechanics, and physics.”

These were the things I was interested in that Yuri had told me a lot about.

“C-Celestial mechanics? That’s a subject?”

“It’s the study of the motion of stars.”

“O-Oh... You sure are interestin’... Now I can see why Yuri was worried.” Lilly gave me a pained smile.

Huh...?

II

Carol came back while I was playing a leisurely game of togi against Myalo.

“Yuri, I’ve done what I could for Sham.”

I’d asked Carol to be something like Sham’s guardian while she was new to the academy. She seemed to be taking the duty seriously.

I couldn’t imagine anyone bullying Sham now that she’d been introduced to the dorm by Her Royal Highness herself. I felt confident that everything would go smoothly for her...except maybe her studies.

“You two have something arranged, don’t you? You can go and take care of it. Don’t worry about me,” Myalo said from across the togi board.

“You’re sure? Sorry.” I felt bad about leaving the game.

“Hold on. You’re playing togi?” Carol approached us and leaned over the board to get a better look.

Carol wasn’t a strong player. To put it another, less polite way, she sucked. Much like Rook, she loved the game, but she was the unfortunate type who never got any better despite her passion. She’d even studied the standard moves, but it hadn’t been enough—she was still one of the more mediocre players here in the dorm.

“I don’t mind waiting for your game to finish.”

“You can watch, but that’s it.”

A short while later I placed my hand flat on the board. “I concede.”

Myalo simply smiled.

A certain idiot, however, reacted with disbelief. “Huh? You gave up too quickly. Keep playing.”

“He has checkmate in seven,” I said.

To demonstrate, I made another move. Myalo reacted instantly, as if he’d known what I’d do. After we’d repeated that same process four more times, it was clear to see that I was in check. He had me in a corner.

“Oho. I’m surprised you noticed that.” Carol sounded impressed.

It was an understandable reaction. Few people would’ve seen the checkmate coming from seven moves away.

“I was already caught in Myalo’s trap by the time I noticed.”

He was good at luring me into traps. Although that sort of ploy was obvious against most other players, I could never tell with Myalo. He’d let me take a few of his minor pieces, only to pave the way to seize my major pieces. It left me so paranoid that my own offense was weakened, which just made it easier for him to keep up his attacks.

In this game, I’d realized I was just five moves away from walking into checkmate. When I’d tried to maneuver out of it, though, Myalo had simply trapped me into another checkmate through a different sequence of moves. All the while, the state of the board made it look as though it was a close game. I understood why Carol thought I’d given in too early.

“I hate to run off before we’ve had a chance to talk about how the game went, but I don’t think I’ve got a choice,” I said. There was no way I could ignore my arrangement with Carol.

“Very well. I’ll put the board away,” Myalo replied.

“Sorry.”

“Please ensure Her Highness has an enjoyable afternoon.”

Wow, he’s really got the wrong idea.

“We’re not heading out to have fun, you know.”

“Aren’t you? I could have sworn you were going on a date,” Myalo teased.

What a stupid thing to say.

“Don’t be stupid,” Carol told him with an astonished look. For once, we agreed on something. Then she looked to me and asked, “Is today some sort of holiday where everyone says stupid things to each other? It’s just someone else said a similar thing to me in White Birch.”

I’d never heard of a strange event like that.

“It’s just how the situation looks,” Myalo noted with an evil smile on his face.

“No, it doesn’t. Come on, we’re going,” Carol grumbled as she grabbed my hand and led me away.

Myalo watched with great amusement while waving us goodbye.



In exchange for Carol introducing Sham to the academy, I’d agreed to let her ride my kingeagle. It was barely any trouble at all.

I’d brought my own eagle to the academy, and Carol had gotten it into her head that my skill as a rider was down to my eagle’s good training.

There was no shortage of would-be sky knights, but not all of them had their own kingeagle. Keeping one wasn’t as simple as taking care of a chicken. They were also expensive birds, so the Knight Academy simply couldn’t afford to raise hundreds of them. That was why it was common for anyone from a family wealthy enough to keep kingeagles to have their own personal bird at the academy. For every person using their own bird, one less student would be kicked out of the sky knight course. Because of these reasons, the academy didn’t simply encourage those with birds to bring them—they practically mandated it, barring exceptional circumstances.

The truth was that students who didn’t bring a kingeagle would face many problems. The eagles owned by the Knight Academy endured rough treatment each day, which took a physical toll. The impact this had on the bird’s health increased the chances of an accident.

I hadn’t ridden one of those birds myself, but I knew they couldn’t be pleasant

to ride. The academy lacked the time needed to periodically retrain the birds and fix bad habits they'd gained from their unskilled riders.

In addition, a shortage of birds meant students had to take turns to practice. Students without their own bird were slow to improve because they only got about half as much training. The time limit imposed by their increasing body weight often meant that they'd have to give up on becoming a sky knight unless they advanced quickly.

Another thing I'd learned after entering the Knight Academy was that half of the students who mastered the skills necessary to gain a sky knight qualification wouldn't actually have much to do with kingeagles afterward. It was easy enough to ride them regularly while studying at the academy, but after graduation, many wouldn't get another opportunity for decades, making them sky knights in name only.

A family like mine had no reason to deny me a kingeagle. I'd been given one by Rook. His name was Stardust—Sham had chosen it.

Rook had hand-reared him from an egg, which was a rarity for him these days. Although Rook's ranch continued to produce eagles as always, rearing and training birds was no longer his main occupation.

There were exceptions, of course. When I'd seen him a while back, he told me he planned to raise a new kingeagle because his was getting old. He'd soon be raising a bird from an egg once again.

Carol had entered the sky knight course and was turning out to be a skilled rider. Her eagle's name was Mountain Haze; a name chosen by Her Majesty the Queen.

Mountain Haze was the bird we'd delivered during my very first visit to the royal capital, so I'd ridden her myself that day. She must've been pampered and spoiled rotten in the royal castle's birdcage though, because she'd grown badly behaved since our last meeting. She now had a habit of pecking at the caretakers' heads.

Naturally, she didn't peck her rider, Carol, but even just one eagle in the birdcages with this bad habit meant that the caretakers all had to wear iron helmets. The bird's sharp beak could easily draw blood, and might even leave a

bald spot after the wound had healed.

The moment I stepped into the birdcage, Stardust noticed and hurried down to me.

“Kurrrrr.” Stardust made a low, purring sound to greet me. He came close and held out his beak.

“Good boy, Stardust.”

He made the same content sound when I touched his beak.

His eyes—black pupils set against yellow—narrowed with satisfaction. I continued to pet him for a while before picking up a saddle and leading him outside. Carol was waiting for us.

“Here you go. Some food.”

Eagles, much like dogs, grew friendly toward people who fed them.

Carol held a fish that resembled a cod just below Stardust’s beak. A kingeagle could swallow these whole. Stardust gripped the fish’s tail in his beak and tossed it up into the air. When it came back down, it disappeared into his wide-open mouth.

Their natural habitats were fjords on the far side of the mountains. Wild kingeagles still existed, and they mostly preyed upon land mammals such as deer. They had a unique way of hunting that involved swooping down and catching the prey in their talons, then carrying them up into the air before dropping them from high above. The birds would either feed on the carcass where it had landed on the ground, or they’d take it to their nest for their mate and chicks to feed on.

Kingeagles rarely attacked humans, but since they instinctively dropped their prey over open ground, deer would sometimes come crashing through the roofs of village homes near their habitats.

They also preyed on marine mammals, which meant they also consumed fish when they ate the mammal’s entrails. Although they didn’t hunt for fish specifically, they had no qualms about eating them, and saltwater fish here were generally free from parasites.

“Good boy.”

Rather than shrink away, Stardust presented his beak when Carol reached out her hand to pet him. She used her narrow fingers to stroke his beak and fine feathers.

“Keep feeding him. I’ll put his saddle on,” I said.

When I moved to put on the saddle, Stardust willingly folded up his legs and sat down on the ground.

What a good boy you are.

I threw the saddle over his back and then began securing the fasteners. Stardust was used to this process and didn’t protest. I finished securing the saddle while Carol continued to toss Stardust one fish after another. He gulped each one down greedily.

“Go on. Get on,” I said.

“What? Right here?”

It wasn’t normal to get on a bird right next to their cage. Normally, students took their bird over to a takeoff and landing area first for safety reasons.

“I want him to get used to you before he tries to fly. I’m sure he can walk just fine carrying your weight.”

Stardust regularly carried one child and one adult with a combined weight of close to eighty kilograms—quite a burden for a kingeagle—so Carol alone was nothing. He was rarely made to walk while carrying heavy loads. Although Carol was lighter, Stardust would still be wasting energy by carrying her over to the takeoff area. Still, it was worth it because it meant he was less likely to panic over the unfamiliar rider while midair.

“It’s an honor to have a royal princess on your back. You be good,” I whispered to Stardust too quietly for Carol to hear.

Stardust couldn’t understand me, but he gave me a “Kurrr, kurrr” in response regardless.

“Safety restraints, all secure.” Carol announced her safety checks out loud like a true honor student.

You'd think we were in class... But that's fine, I guess.

I was just about to pull on the reins, but before I could, Stardust guessed what I wanted and stood up. He was such a well-trained bird. Rook had been thorough. I'd come to understand why his birds were so popular among sky knights.

I continued to lead with the reins until we reached the takeoff point.

The area was a flat piece of land that wasn't as well-tended as the rest of the academy grounds. Although the trees and rocks had been cleared, there were still some weeds scattered about. An eagle didn't necessarily need a runway, but an area like this was crucial for inexperienced riders because sometimes they'd fail to take off at all.

A rider could use the reins to instruct the kingeagle to take off and the bird would handle the rest. But some riders got so spooked when they began to ascend that they'd pull the reins tightly toward themselves, causing the bird to pitch back and forth before crashing.

In such cases, crashing into a piece of ground cushioned with thick grass was less likely to cause injury than crashing into a tree, a building, or other areas of the academy grounds that had been hardened under footfall.

I tossed the reins I'd been holding up to Carol, and she caught them in midair.

"He's a good eagle," I told her, "but he's learned some bad habits from me. Watch yourself."

"I know, I know."

"Off you go."

Carol tugged the reins close to herself, causing Stardust to lift his head. His wings sprung open and began to beat powerfully, causing him to ascend. He continued traveling forward and upward.

It hadn't been long since Carol and I were given permission to fly without an instructor, and it had been even more recently that we were given permission to practice unsupervised. Myalo was also trying his hand at the sky knight course, but he hadn't been given permission yet. He didn't have a kingeagle of

his own, so his progress was much slower.

I began thinking that I should let Myalo practice with Stardust too once he had permission to practice solo. Myalo's slender frame meant that he'd be safe for some time, but he still must've felt a sense of urgency to improve—he certainly wouldn't be able to fly with an adult by the time he reached fifteen, after all.

Aerial maneuvers were a particular problem—they couldn't be learned unless they were practiced while flying with an instructor. They were dangerous to practice because they would often cause the bird to stall. Much like an aircraft pilot, a rider at high enough altitude could recover from a stall while the bird was falling, but kingeagles differed from planes because they were living things. A stalling kingeagle would panic if they were in the hands of someone inexperienced. They might even try to throw the rider off to make themselves lighter. Crashes of that sort were about as common as accidents caused during takeoff and landing. They were also the most common type of fatal flying accident.

According to Rook, the panic came down to the accumulated stress of being controlled by a terrible rider who wouldn't let the bird fly properly. As that stress built up, the bird lost faith in its rider. Then, when a stall occurred, the bird felt that ridding itself of the rider was necessary for survival. At least, that was how Rook saw it; it wasn't a generally accepted theory.

It wasn't strictly necessary to master aerial maneuvers in order to be qualified to fly, but a sky knight wouldn't be considered full-fledged by their peers if they didn't have complete control over their bird, so it was best to learn them if possible.

But since many of the riders were conceited nobles with a tendency to get cocky, accidents were common enough during solo practice that many of the influential knight families would forbid their sons from becoming a sky knight right from the start. The rationale was that there was too great a risk of the heir to the family headship becoming too badly injured to serve in the role.

There were also muscular knights whose heavy builds made them poorly suited to being a sky knight. Large children were often told to give up on the

course. Obviously, I'm talking about students like Dolla. He never went anywhere near the eagles for that reason.

I looked up and saw Carol atop Stardust, flying gracefully through the sky. She was keeping him remarkably stable. She also wasn't attempting any of the maneuvers that she hadn't been taught. There was no chance of her having an accident.

I figured I could safely take a nap while waiting for her to come down. I sat down in the grass by the roots of a tree and rested my back against its trunk.

Such beautiful weather.

The sun was shining brightly and the sky was clear blue. There was only a short part of each year when it was possible to nap outside in this kingdom. I had to enjoy it while I could.



My enjoyment was cut short.

"Haah... Haah..."

For some reason, a girl I'd never seen before had come running up to me, panting for breath. She was a blonde girl wearing the Cultural Academy uniform. Her hair color was a rarity among Shanti people; so rare, in fact, that Carol and Her Majesty were the only blonde people I'd ever seen.

When a girl from the Cultural Academy came wandering into the takeoff area, you could be sure she was a complete idiot. They'd see this grassy area, decide it was perfect for a picnic, spread out some blankets, and cause a ruckus. Naturally, that wasn't tolerated since this area needed to be used for takeoffs and landings. Their little get-together would end when someone angrily chased them away.

I knew better than to get involved with girls like them.

"I don't suppose you've seen my...sister?" the girl asked.

As she got her breath back, she raised her head and saw my face for the first time. The sight of me seemed to surprise her.

What's with that reaction?

I'd never had a stranger come up to me and look at me like this before. I couldn't help but turn around to check that Godzilla wasn't standing behind me. But no, there was nothing there but a few trees.

I took another glance at the girl. She looked younger than me. She had refined facial features, but I got the impression she was the bratty type.

"What's up?" I asked.

"What's your name?" she asked in return.

I had no idea why she wanted to know my name, but I saw no harm in telling her.

"Yuri."

"Okay, Yuri. And your family name?"

"Ho."

"Yuri Ho. Indeed. Aren't you the Ho family's second son?"

What's with her? If there's a second son, I'd sure like to meet him. Maybe she means Rook, but I'm from a different generation.

"What's it matter? Go stick your nose in something else."

"Excuse me? What a way to talk to me. Do you even know who I am?"

Oh, don't get full of yourself. If you think you can treat me like a commoner who's going to grovel at your feet, you've got another thing coming.

"Not a clue," I replied.

"I'm royalty."

Royalty? Well, that explains the hair. Explains the haughty attitude too.

Although Carol didn't act anything like this, it might've been normal for most royal family members.

"Yeah?" I muttered with disinterest.

"Carla Flue Shaltl. That's my name."

Oh... So this is Carol's little sister.

I was aware that Carol had a sister, but I'd never seen her until now. If the two girls merely shared the same father I wouldn't have been surprised, but they shared the same mother without a doubt. It was very rare for a Shanti woman to give birth in two consecutive years. Rook and Suzuya still hadn't produced a second child despite trying for the past ten years.

"So you're Carol's little sister?"

"How dare you refer to my sister by her first name in my presence?! You've got some guts."

I might've actually felt gutsy if it wasn't for the fact that I always went back to calling her "Her Highness" around adults who might get upset with me.

"The two of us don't feel the need to be polite with each other," I explained.

"You're a good acquaintance of hers?"

"Suppose so."

Not sure I'd call us that... It's hard to find a good word for our relationship. "We don't feel the need to be polite" is one way to put it, but that's not something people normally say, is it?

"Very well. In that case, I'm willing to enter into a relationship with you," Carla declared.

"Uh...what?"

Where'd this come from all of a sudden?

"I said that we're going to enter into a relationship."

"I don't get what that means."

"But you're pleased, aren't you?" The girl swept her blonde hair upward with her hand, causing it to ripple in the breeze.

She's kinda pretty, I guess. Some old pedo might happily throw his life away for a chance to get into some trouble with her.

"It's an appealing offer," I said.

"Yes, indeed."

“But I’ll have to turn it down.”

“Oh?”

I wasn’t gay, but I didn’t want to be in a relationship with a girl. Or maybe I did, just not with a princess...or with any of the girls from the Cultural Academy, in fact.

I’d received good counsel on this matter from a wise elder known as Rook. He’d been one of the most popular boys at the school, and yet he hadn’t dated a girl from the Cultural Academy even once.

Although the academy did nothing to stop us from fraternizing, students who slept together would immediately have to marry. Noblewomen—witches, in other words—considered it a must to remain chaste until they were wed. But once married, they could have themselves a paramour, or even create themselves a reverse harem thanks to their system of polyandry. They just needed to wait until marriage.

The problem was that—for reasons beyond understanding—the man was always blamed if an unmarried woman lost her virginity while in a perfectly respectable relationship. He’d then have to make up for his actions by marrying her. Any excuses—such as claiming he’d been led on, that they’d just been fooling around, or that he’d pulled out—didn’t work. Rook had explained all of this to me and stressed its importance.

Any man who found a girl they truly loved after he’d already slept with a witch would live to forever regret his past mistakes, with no way to set things right. Such tragic love stories often played out at the Knight Academy, or so I’d been told.

Fools learn from experience; wise men learn from history. Rook was the latter. It was why he’d been able to avoid getting engaged to anyone he felt nothing for, leaving him free to enter into a marriage truly motivated by love with Suzuya. If he’d made mistakes while he was still at the academy, he might’ve even been forced to complete his knight training rather than choosing his own path in life.

But that didn’t mean Rook had been forced to keep his virginity until he’d met Suzuya at the age of twenty-something. He’d known to visit the taverns to meet

city girls and where the brothels were. A wise knight never got involved with the girls from the Cultural Academy.

And the girl before me wasn't just a Cultural Academy student—she was royalty. If, by some twist of fate, something happened between us, I'd be trapped in a hopeless situation. I didn't care how cute she was. Who'd want to get into a relationship with someone likely to turn their life upside down? Maybe an old man willing to die for the sake of some long-unfulfilled desire, but I still had a lot to live for. I wasn't about to throw away my future.

"Say something," she demanded.

Maybe I should tell her to go away.

"Am I not good enough? I'm royalty."

"I spend enough time around royalty thanks to Carol. I don't need two princesses."

"Are you and her...romantically involved?" Carla knitted her brows and scowled at me.

What a crazy thing to say.

"Who'd want to get involved with a girl like *her*?"

Carla's face relaxed once more. "You're right. Well, you can get involved with me then."

I'm tired of her already.

"Sorry, but I'm not ready for marriage just yet," I told her.

"Don't you know there's a difference between dating and marriage?"

This brat's too precocious for my liking. Doesn't she know that there are some ironclad rules at this academy? Or maybe she actually thinks that the horny pubescent boys here would be happy with just holding hands.

"I wouldn't want to fraternize with a girl I have no intention to marry. That wouldn't be honorable."

I didn't really mean it, but it was a good excuse.

"Oh, really? I suppose I'll give up then."

Oh, good. I put her off.

“Now leave me alone. I’m going back to sleep.”

“Hmpf. Bye then. When you see my sister, tell her I need to speak with her,” Carla said before heading off somewhere.

I slouched with my back against the tree and went back to my siesta.

“Hey... Hey!” A voice woke me up.

I opened my eyes to see Stardust before me. Carol held the reins.

“Ngh... You’re done already?”

“I’m done. I’m surprised you can even sleep here.”

It *had* actually been a little painful on my back. Still, even if it wasn’t, a pampered rich girl like Carol might not have been able to sleep anywhere that wasn’t her bed.

“Really? It’s not any worse than napping at a desk.”

“I don’t nap at desks,” she replied.

“Yeah, you’re too serious for that.”

I slowly climbed to my feet.

“Wanna head back?” I suggested. “I’m hungry.”

It was already long past lunch time.

“All right.”

Once we’d put Stardust back in the birdcage, we returned to the dorm. Carol went off somewhere without eating anything at all. She was always busy.



I didn’t see Carol again until dinnertime, when she returned to the dorm and approached me while I was eating in the dining hall.

“Hey, Yuri. Have you seen my sister around?”

“Ah, now that you mention it...”

I’d completely forgotten that I was supposed to let Carol know that her sister

wanted to see her. Maybe it was still worth telling her.

“She asked me to tell you she wants to talk.”

“It’s too late now. I already spoke to her.”

Carol yanked out the chair next to me and sat down. Then she leaned in uncomfortably close to my ear.

“Let me ask you something. Is she... Are you... Did you fall for my little sister?”

“What?!” I yelped, sounding a lot louder than I’d intended.

Carol moved away from my ear.

“Maybe everyone *is* saying stupid things today,” I added.

What she just asked certainly counts.

“It’s just that she—” Carol began.

“I’d totally forgotten until you mentioned it, but she talked to me while you were flying on Stardust. She’s a cheeky little shi—Student.”

I probably shouldn’t call her a “little shit” in front of her own sister.

“She told me that you two are in love.”

What?! That’s crazy talk.

“Tell her to keep her delusions to herself.”

I never would’ve guessed the girl was so crazy. What an irresponsible thing to say.

“Love” wasn’t such a bad word on its own, but at this academy, “*in love*” was more than just a phrase that young people used without much thought—it held special significance. It often implied things like bonds between families and plans to wed. My own family’s status was high enough that I wouldn’t have to worry if some no-name noble went around saying these things, but this was a member of the royal family. People were bound to take it seriously, which would lead to huge problems for me. In that sense, it was irresponsible.

“So you haven’t fallen for her?”

“Of course not. Do you even need to ask?”

“Okay. That’s a relief.”

She genuinely did look reassured. If she’d taken a moment to use her brain, she would’ve known it wasn’t true.

By the time I’d finished dinner, my anger still hadn’t died down.

“That girl must be as stupid as Dolla.”

I instantly regretted saying it out loud. It clearly wasn’t something I should’ve said in front of her older sister. If Carol were to ever compare Sham to Dolla, I’d probably go mad, no matter how much trouble Sham caused over at the Cultural Academy. I might even start yelling about how there were certain lines that shouldn’t be crossed.

Certain thoughts were better off left unspoken. A comparison between someone’s close family member and a brainless meathead definitely fell into that category.

Carol’s jaw dropped. “Dolla isn’t stupid. He’s always working to be the best knight he can be. I wish my sister was more like him.”

Uhh... The world sure is a big place. For a short while, all I could think about was how there were all sorts of people out there. *To think, there’s someone capable of saying, “I wish she was more like Dolla.”*

“Have you lost your mind?” I asked, thinking it might actually be the case.

“Dolla is doing everything he can to catch up with you. It’s inspiring to see.”

I felt a sudden chill that gave me goose bumps. *Did the temperature in the dining hall just drop?*

“Well... Sure. If you’re into guys like that, fine. It’s a little weird, but...I’m not here to judge you.”

“Y-You idiot! That’s not what I meant!”

“Then what did you mean?”

I really wanna know. How could you want your sister to be a moron like him? If Sham turned out like that, I think I’d hang myself out of guilt for letting it happen.

“I’m saying I admire him as a knight!”

“You do?”

I don’t know what principles knights are supposed to live by, but the way of the meathead probably isn’t one of them.

“Your view of him’s warped by the fight you had.”

“Hmm... Is it?”

No, there’s more to it than just that.

“Yes it is. Dolla’s amazing in his own way. I’m saying that I wish my sister could be driven by her ambition the way he is.”

“Are you sure? I don’t think the royal family could deal with a member like him. Did you hear that during an outdoor run he—”

“Oi!”

A male voice interrupted me.

“Shut your mouth. You’re trying to turn Princess Carol against me.”

As expected, I saw Dolla behind me when I turned around.

How much did he just hear?

“It’s true, though. And next to White Birch, of all places.”

Fortunately, it hadn’t turned into a major scandal, but I’m sure the girls who saw him were scarred for life. He would’ve been in major trouble if they’d reported him.

“Was your stomachache really that bad?”

“Arrrrgghh! Shut it, jackass!”

“Heh.”

He was right—it wasn’t a story to tell in front of Carol. Especially given that Dolla had a bit of a thing for her.

“Why can’t you two get along?” Carol asked with a sigh.

“Why should we? Anyhow, have you had dinner yet, Carol?” I asked.

“No, I was planning to eat here,” she replied.

I turned to Dolla. “And you haven’t eaten, have you?”

“Obviously not. Why d’you think I’m here?”

Makes sense.

“Well then, you can eat with Carol. I’m already finished.”

Dolla’s expression turned to such obvious joy that I almost laughed.

He’s so easy to figure out.

Chapter 3 — Starting a Business

I

I'd turned fifteen.

I'd now been studying diligently at the academy for five years, which had resulted in gaining virtually all the credits I required from non-practical classes. I'd been exempt from a hundred and twenty of the two hundred credits that I'd been meant to gain from lecture courses, so that had left just eighty credits to gain. After five years of diligent study, it was no wonder that I now had a lot of spare time on my hands.

The only other real change in my life happened half a year ago when Harol left the royal capital.

"I know enough Terolish now. I'm off. Nice knowing you," he'd told me.

Since Harol had been something like a college friend, I'd put in a good word for him while he was trying to get the right to use a harbor. Harrell Trading was on such bad terms with the witch families that he had trouble getting any access to the royal capital's harbor. I made sure he got permission to use one in Ho Province to the south instead. That had been half a year ago, and he still hadn't returned. At this point, it was tough to say whether he was still alive.

So that's where I was in life.

I was reading a Terolish book I'd borrowed from Ms. Ether because, as always, I had nothing to do. I worked through it slowly, putting thin scraps of parchment between the pages when I found passages I didn't understand. I planned to ask her about those parts later.

I'd learned enough Terolish to hold a conversation already, and I wasn't sure whether there was any point in studying more. It was just that I had nothing better to do. I'd looked for other ways to fill my time, but soon gave up. Learning the language was the one thing left that actually felt worth doing.

I was still absentmindedly reading through the book—a dry, boring piece filled with religious arguments—when Carol appeared in the lobby and came over to me.

“I’ve got a letter for you,” she suddenly said while holding it out in front of me.

“What is it?” I asked.

“My mother wants to meet you.”

Huh?!

“Your mother... You can’t mean Her Majesty the Queen?”

“That’s right.”

Seriously...?

“Why would Her Majesty grant me an audience? Did I do something bad?”

“It’s all explained in the letter,” Carol said, pointing at the envelope in my hand.

Oh, right. Well, if she put it in writing, the best thing to do is read it.

The letter was inside an envelope that felt like it was made from the highest-quality parchment. It was sealed with beautiful scarlet wax, and I was sure that it, too, was of the highest quality. I broke it and read the letter inside.

To Yuri Ho of the Knight Academy

Her Majesty wishes to bestow a favor upon you in recognition of your work to develop a remedy for sorepox.

You have therefore been granted an audience and should attend the royal castle on the appointed date.

There was also a great big royal seal stamped on it, which looked oversized compared to the small amount of text. Presumably it was there to make the letter look official.

So that’s what this is about. Hmmm... Maybe I’ll get some money.

I guessed that Rook had told other families how well the treatment had worked, and now it had reached the ears of Her Majesty.

“But how am I supposed to know?” I asked.

“Know what?”

“It says on the appointed date, but then it doesn’t tell me when. Am I supposed to contact the royal castle and arrange it myself?”

“That’s not how it works.”

It’s not?

“I was told to fetch you,” Carol explained.

“I’m going with you?”

I don’t even need to make an appointment?

“Yeah. You can go in your uniform.”

“I don’t even have to get changed?”

Won’t there be some ceremony to it? I thought I’d have to head back to the residence and get the maids to tailor some new clothes for me. Can I really just wear my uniform?

“You mean it isn’t going to be one of those audiences in a big chamber with a lot of ministers and guards lined up?”

“What? No. She said it’ll be in one of the inner rooms. It’ll probably face out onto the garden.”

“Oh... So it’s like that.”

That sounds less stressful. She just shattered my illusions, though.

“When do you want me to take you there?” Carol asked.

“I’ve got so much free time lately, I feel like I’ll go mad. I can go any day during the afternoon.”

“You’ve really got nothing to do...?” Carol looked at me with some pity in her eyes.

Must be nice being able to do the Cultural Academy courses too.

“You can see as much. I’m so bored that I’m seriously thinking about finding myself a pen pal.”

“A p-pen pal? *You?!?*”

I didn’t think it was so shocking, but it was enough to make Carol raise her voice in surprise.

“I’m kidding.”

In truth, it wasn’t a joke. Something had come over me about fifteen minutes earlier, and I’d started to look into it seriously. But I’d come to my senses just five minutes ago and stopped. An audience with Her Majesty sounded like fun by comparison.

“Oh, it’s a joke? You surprised me,” Carol said.

“So what’s our schedule? Are you going to tell me the plans later?”

“If you’re free, we can go today. No reason to wait.”

Today? We’re not just paying a visit to someone’s grandma here.

“Are you sure? It sounds kinda rude...”

“Ha,” Carol laughed. “Never thought I’d hear you worry about politeness.”

Just what kind of guy does she think I am?

“But I’m going to be in Her Majesty’s presence.”

“This is surprising,” she said, the shock in her voice all too evident.

What kind of impression does she have of me? Does she think I’m so full of myself that I’d walk right up to the queen and pick a fight?

After our conversation, we left the dorm and headed toward the royal castle. Naturally, when the royal guard saw Carol’s familiar face, that was enough for them to grant us entrance.

I let Carol lead me deeper and deeper into the castle. We began climbing a staircase that seemed to extend indefinitely upward. For a moment I thought we might climb to the top of a tower, but we didn’t get that high. After ascending just two flights of stairs, we headed into a room with a raised terrace.

Warm rays of sunlight beamed down around us, reaching pots of flowers that lay here and there. Some were round pots, while others were large earthen planters. They must've been chosen depending on when the plants they held came into season, because each and every one contained lush leaves and flowers that were in some process of blooming. There weren't any pipes carrying water up here, so someone would need to draw water to tend to the plants each day.

In the center of the terrace was a round table with a fine wood grain. Unlike other tables left outdoors, this one was spotless—there wasn't a speck of mold or dirt in sight. It looked like it was cleaned after each use and then stored back inside.

A familiar woman sat on one of the chairs at the table. I could remember kissing her hand during the academy's admission ceremony. She looked neither old nor young, and while her appearance was average, she gave off a sense of refinement and subdued tension. Then again, this impression probably came from me being subconsciously intimidated by her authority.

"I'm glad you're here," the woman said in a voice similar to Carol's.

I quickly bent over on one knee, showing her the respectful bow posture.

"It is my greatest honor to be granted an audience with you, Your Majesty. Please allow me to express my gratitude and happiness."

"Oh my... Oho ho," she laughed.

"Quit the act, idiot," Carol scolded me from above.

"Please raise your head," Her Majesty said.

I rose to my feet and brushed some dust off my knee, feeling a little awkward.

"What's your problem?" I asked Carol.

I spent the whole journey here coming up with that greeting.

"You don't have to be all stiff and formal when we're not in the audience chamber," Carol replied.

"I don't see what's wrong with a bit of formality."

“Well, sure, but...it’s weird to see you getting this into it.”

She’s so rude. But I’m not exactly polite to her either, so I’ll forgive her.

“Well, aren’t you two good friends?” Her Majesty smiled warmly at us. She didn’t look irritated by our behavior at all. “Now, take a seat.”

Carol quickly sat down.

When I remained standing, Carol asked, “What’s wrong? Just sit.”



“You think I’m going to just sit down before Her Majesty offers me a chair?”

“Go ahead and be seated,” Her Majesty insisted.

Ah, okay.

“Forgive me for being so bold,” I apologized while choosing a seat.

“You’re much more well-mannered than the boy I’d heard of,” Her Majesty said.

“You do me a great honor.”

“He’s putting on an act,” Carol said.

“It’s no mere act, Princess Carol,” I retorted in a dead-serious voice to annoy her.

“Stop. That gives me the creeps.”

“I’m rather jealous,” Her Majesty said. “I always wanted such a friend in my student days. Perhaps I should have entered the Knight Academy too.”

“No one there besides this guy would dare talk to me like this,” Carol said.

She doesn’t have a single nice thing to say about me, does she?

“Oh, here comes our tea,” Her Majesty said.

A maid had appeared. “Pardon me,” she said before placing a tray holding a tea set down on the table.

I could tell at a glance that these beautiful, delicate teacups were expensive. Ornate, detailed patterns adorned each thin side. I’d never seen anything like them; fancy tea sets like these weren’t exactly fashionable among knight families.

After setting the tea set down, the maid bowed at us, then stepped back from the table. For some reason, she hadn’t actually prepared our tea. Normally, it would’ve been brewed in the teapot before it was brought out, which would leave us with nothing to do but pour it into our cups.

Her Majesty reached out for the teapot.

Carol stopped her. “Mother, please allow me.”

“Oh? Please do.”

It seemed Her Majesty herself would've prepared my drink if Carol hadn't stepped in. No doubt that would've been a rare experience.

Carol used precise movements to add hot water to the teapot, scoop out appropriate amounts of substances contained in various jars, and then add them into the teapot to brew. Some of the little actions she made in the process were unfathomable to me, but they were probably all part of making good tea.

A short while later, my cup had been filled before me along with a small plate containing a tea cake. I'd have thought that a page or a maid would always pour the tea, but Carol was clearly used to doing it herself. Even in my own family, it wasn't normal for people like Satsuki to make their own tea.

“Thank you, Carol,” Her Majesty said before picking up her cup. “This is a fine tea. Very well done, Carol.”

“Thank you, mother.”

“Thank you,” I said to them both before picking up my own cup to try it.

It was herbal tea, completely different from the barley tea most people drank and just as good as Her Majesty had suggested. There was a hint of mint, but with none of the sharpness that often accompanied menthol, and a sweet, fruity aftertaste. A hot drink like this was ideal, given the air was still a little chilly at this point in early spring.

“Nothing to say?” Carol looked at me with what might've been considered expectation.

I assumed she wanted to know what I thought of it. Maybe this was similar to Japanese tea ceremonies, where it was customary to offer some opinions on the drink.

Hmmm.

“I consider this an exceptionally good tea,” I told her.

“Why are you talking like that?” Carol asked with a laugh.

I must've said something weird. It did sound a bit off.

We chatted idly about life at the academy until we finished our tea.

“I’d be quite happy to go on talking like this, but there’s another topic we must discuss,” Her Majesty said.

On to the reason I’m here?

“I recently dispatched a letter to Rook, telling him I would reward him for his services, but he refused. He told me that the credit belongs entirely to his son. Was it truly your idea, Yuri?”

Well...I suppose there’s no point in lying about it.

“It was,” I replied.

Rook should’ve just taken that reward for himself.

“How did you arrive at the idea?”

I’d been thinking about this excuse on the way here.

“It was something I’d heard from an employee back when I worked on Rook’s ranch. The remedy has been famous among cattle farmers since long ago, so I suggested to my father that we try to recreate it ourselves. It wasn’t my own invention, although you could say that I rediscovered it.”

“Oh, I see. How strange that the practice wasn’t more widespread before now.”

“Indeed.”

Doesn’t sound strange to me.

Even though I came up with the idea, I couldn’t have made it widespread without an understanding authority figure like Rook ready to help out. To anyone without a knowledge of infections and antibodies, it was hard to believe that covering a wound on their skin with the awful gunk that came from cows would prevent the disease, and few people would want to test the idea on their own body. The process looked like a bizarre and unhygienic folk remedy. Even Rook wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t been so passionate in my attempts to explain it to him.

“By finding this remedy, you’ve saved the lives of many people. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

All I’d wanted was a way to stop my own family from getting infected. I didn’t feel as though the people I’d saved in the process owed me anything in return.

“I think a reward is in order. What would you like?”

“A reward?”

The letter did say something about a favor. If she’s asking what I want, does that mean I can have anything within reason? There’s only one thing that comes to mind...

“Could I request something other than material possessions or money?”

“Oh, but of course. Within the bounds of common sense.”

I hope this isn’t considered out of bounds...

“I’d like some exclusive manufacturing rights.”

“Manufacturing rights? Don’t you mean exclusive marketing rights?” Her Majesty narrowed her eyes.

There was already a system of exclusive marketing rights in place that allowed an individual or organization to be given a monopoly over a particular product. Obviously, people couldn’t have a monopoly over certain essentials, like wheat, but the kingdom allowed merchants or nobles ownership over certain things like salt, copper, and wax. These rights were granted by the queen and, although they had no effect in chieftain provinces, they still held incredible value. They made it illegal for newly established stores to deal in those products.

“Not exactly. What I’d like is known as a patent. Whenever I invent an original product or process, I’d like to be granted a patent over it that protects my profits.”

“Hm... I’m not sure I understand.”

How am I going to explain this?

“For example, let’s say I spend the next ten years coming up with an incredibly useful invention through a process of trial and error. Naturally, I can

make a profit by turning it into a marketable product. For the sake of the example, let's assume the product is useful and highly popular."

"Go on."

"Now, of course, other people are going to make the same product and sell it so they can make a profit too. So what would be the point of my painstaking, decade-long development? That's the problem I have."

"Ah, I see. But then why not simply keep the method for making your product secret?"

I thought she'd ask that.

"Indeed, if I'd invented some bottled medicine, it would be hard for others to determine the original recipe. But what about, for example, a mechanism that greatly improves the accuracy of a clock? If I sell my clock, the buyer can simply dismantle it to learn how it works. The only way to keep it secret would be not to sell it."

"Yes, you're right. But your patent system would prevent a lot of people from benefiting from the invention. Other clock makers would have to make their products without it."

"Not necessarily. They could use the invention if they were willing to give up some portion of the revenue from sales based on how much the new technology increased their profits. Going back to the clock example, the mechanism would be just one part of the whole thing, so about five percent of the total price might be appropriate. Though in the case of a medicine, the invention itself is the whole product, so the seller would have to give up more. Then the money paid would be like compensation for the expenses incurred during the invention process, so it's much fairer than having people pay nothing at all."

"I see..." She was still concerned about something.

"But if those rights were effective indefinitely, it would still be unfair," I said, guessing at what Her Majesty was thinking.

"Hmm... How so?" she asked.

“For example, if a patent is given to someone who invents a spear and their family continues to reap the rewards for thousands of years, that wouldn’t be right. So it’s better to set a time limit on each patent. I think somewhere between twenty and thirty years would be appropriate. After that point, the invention would be public, and everyone could make use of it. The kingdom would benefit in the long run.”

“That’s very charitable.”

“Yes. My original motivation wasn’t to make a profit.” That was a bold-faced lie.

“Very well. I’ll consider it. But unfortunately, I’m unable to give you an immediate response. I’ll have to discuss it with various people.”

“Of course.”

“And I must warn you—if we do offer these patents, they won’t be available to just you.”

“But of course. That wouldn’t be a problem. I’d only like to safeguard the profits generated by my own inventions. As long as I’m one of the people who can enjoy patent protections, I have no objections.”

I’d come up with a lot of ideas in my spare time. Originally, I’d been considering marketing something to make money, but the more I’d dug into it, the more problems I’d thought of, so I’d lost any enthusiasm I had.

In this kingdom, the seven witches had massive amounts of capital to throw around, so they’d simply steal any idea for a groundbreaking new product that made big money. A few knockoffs offered by competitors wouldn’t have been so bad, but these families went beyond that. They wouldn’t hesitate to use their influence to crush my business, claim my share of the market, and hoard all the profit for themselves despite not being the original inventors.

Not only was the scenario possible, it was almost inevitable—there were several known cases of it happening. It meant that no one tried anything new, because their efforts would be wasted. That was the society that I was dealing with.

Perhaps they’d go easy on me because I was the heir to the Ho family, but

they certainly wouldn't hesitate to copy my ideas. A patent system would give me peace of mind. But if she ended up refusing my suggestion, I planned to simply ask for money.

"Is this what you're going to waste your time on now?" Carol asked, looking at me suspiciously.

What does she mean, waste time?

"There's nothing wrong with making money. The more, the better," I told her.

"Did you forget what being a knight is all about?" she asked, sounding like a stubborn old man.

"Knights can't eat honor, you know. I need money to live."

The main concern for the majority of knights was earning cash, though many preferred to refer to it as paying their keep. Not a single one of them could live on lofty ideals like faith and dignity alone.

"Ugh... Well, yeah, but..."

"Unlike you, I'm not attending Cultural Academy classes. I've got nothing to do with my afternoons. I've pretty much run out of classes to take."

"If you've got time, you could practice with a spear," Carol chided me with an incredibly serious expression.

What an idiot. I practice with my spear every morning. Why would I keep going into the afternoon?

"But I'm not going to be a fighter," I replied.

Fighters were those who were fond of spears and honed their skills for the battlefield. In the event of a war, they were employed and arranged into mercenary troops, so they were particularly common in and around the Ho family's territory. During times of peace, they could become combat instructors, teaching others in town how to wield a spear. Or they could find work through organizations established and operated by other fighters. They stopped short of becoming private military contractors, but they often provided security to merchants.

"I know, but...making money is just..."

She still doesn't like it?

"Carol, don't you understand the importance of making money?"

Oh, Her Majesty's speaking up for me.

"Mother..."

"We never have to worry about money ourselves, so the concept of earning our keep seems alien to us, but that's what most people do. You shouldn't look down on them for it."

"I wasn't looking d-down on anyone..." Carol suddenly looked flustered.

"It's true that the pursuit of money shouldn't make a knight-in-training forget their duty, but Yuri is an exceptional student who finished most of his classes early. I don't think he needs lecturing on this topic."

It was a sensible, mature sentiment. But as much as I could've used a mother's opinion here, this wasn't what I had in mind. After all, she was speaking as Carol's mother, not mine. If Carol were to agree with me, Her Majesty might've said something else entirely. I would have to seriously consider talking things over with Rook and Suzuya.

"We mustn't allow people to do bad things for wealth, but there's nothing wrong with the desire for money itself. When everyone can make a profit, our kingdom flourishes. I hope you understand everything I'm telling you, Carol."

Oh jeez, she's still going. I hadn't taken her for the type of parent who gives long lectures.

Her Majesty's sermon continued for a while longer, and Carol grew more and more deflated during it. By the time it ended, she was in tears.

"I...understand..."

Although none of it was my fault, I felt bad for her.

"Cheer up," I said in an attempt to console her.

"Sh-Shut up!" Carol clenched her teeth and stood up, kicking her chair in rage as she did.

"What? I'm just trying to cheer you up."

“You know what you’re doing! You’re making fun of me!”

“No, I’m not. All I said was ‘cheer up.’”

“You said it to tease me! You’re the whole reason I got in trouble!”

Ah, that’s what it’s really about. She’s blaming me.

“Come now,” Her Majesty cut in sharply.

“Uh...”

“Don’t point your finger at your friend. It’s unladylike.”

She was pointing at me? I didn’t even notice.

“Uh... I’m sorry.”

“Apologize to Yuri, as well.”

“Uh...” Carol clearly hated that idea.

Her Majesty seemed to take a strict approach to teaching. Making someone with as much pride as Carol apologize in a situation like this felt a little cruel.

“You don’t have to apologize,” I told Carol.

“I think she should,” Her Majesty said.

“We were simply bantering, Your Majesty. It would take the fun out of it if we had to apologize to each other every time.”

“Oh... You really have made a good friend,” she told Carol.

Really?

“I’m not sure I’m worthy of being called that,” I replied.

“Yuri, would you be willing to take her as your bride?”

What...? Did she really just say that?

“Mother...what are you saying? That’s out of the question.”

“For once, we agree on something,” I said.

“If you’re worried about how it might affect our families, you needn’t be—there is past precedent for such unions. You would retain your current surnames, and any daughter you have could become queen, while any son

could become the heir to the Ho family. There would be no problem.”

Hold up. This whole thing sounds too real. I can barely keep up, but I'll just make an excuse for now.

“I don’t think I’m ready to think about marriage,” I said.

“Is that so? Well, do think on it.”

“Mother, I can choose my own husband.”

“Ah, yes, I’d forgotten,” Her Majesty replied.

It sounded like they had some sort of agreement between them—something about Carol being free to choose a man she loves. That would be surprising if it turned out to be true.

We enjoyed tea together for another twenty minutes. After that, Her Majesty had some other business to attend to.

II

Several weeks later, I was once again reading a book in Terolish to kill some time when Carol came to me.

“Yuri, I’ve brought you a letter.”

She handed me an envelope. The letter read, “Your invention has been recognized as Patent No. 1.”

Patent No. 1 was related to papermaking. As you might’ve guessed, I planned to make paper that consisted of plant fibers, rather than the parchment that was currently used. If everything went to plan, I’d make a fortune. Probably.

“Having a side job’s fine, just don’t forget why you’re here,” Carol said. The long lecture she’d gotten a while back didn’t seem to have had much of an effect on her.

“Yeah, I know. My parents will be on my back if I start skipping classes.”

“Well, as long as you understand.”

Carol untied some sort of leather bag from her belt and held it out in front of

me. “And your reward.”

My reward...?

I took the sizable pouch, large enough to fill a child’s hand, and looked inside. It was packed full of gold coins, which amounted to a lot of money.

“What’s this for?”

“I just said—it’s your reward.”

“Reward for what? Something besides the sorepox cure?”

“What, have you done so many great things that you deserve a new reward every few weeks?” Carol asked with a smirk.

“Nothing comes to mind.”

“The seven witches complained. They said that the kingdom might be in the Ho family’s debt if your weird patent system doesn’t actually benefit you in the end.”

“I don’t see why they’re worried about that.”

I hadn’t felt like the kingdom owed me anything in the first place. In fact, I’d walked away thinking everything was settled nicely. Now it felt like I was being paid to stay away.

“I tried to tell mother that such a small amount’s worse than nothing.”

“Small? It looks like a lot to me.”

At a glance, I estimated that there were thirty gold coins in the pouch. A single coin was worth a thousand ruga, which made it roughly thirty thousand in total. Converting ruga to Japanese yen wasn’t straightforward, but it was probably around three million yen.

“I don’t know exactly how big of a deal your discovery was, but I’ve never seen anyone get such little compensation after doing something important enough for mother to summon them herself.”

It made sense. They couldn’t let people think the royal family was a bunch of cheapskates, so giving out hefty sums might’ve been normal for them. The royal family sure had an unusual relationship with money.

“But I’m still a kid. Dropping all this money in my lap hardly seems wise.”

“What? What does your age have to do with it?”

This pampered princess has no idea how the world works.

“If you give a kid a large amount of money, you can bet they’ll find some terrible way to waste it—like going to a high-class brothel and throwing handfuls of coins at the girls there.”

“Wh-What?! G-Give it back! I’m not letting you do that!”

Carol had gotten the wrong idea and was trying to snatch the pouch away. I wasn’t about to surrender my fortune so easily, so I hid the pouch behind my back. But that was just a ruse—I actually tossed it onto the floor on the far side of the bed.

“Come on! Give it here!” Carol yelled, completely drowning out the sound of it landing.

Our scuffle soon turned into a wrestling match, with her pressing herself against me in an attempt to grab the pouch.

“Calm down, idiot! I’m not gonna spend it like that!”

I’ve never even masturbated once yet.

“Haah, haah...” she panted. “You’re sure?”

“I’m sure. But why would you care, anyway?”

“Well...I wouldn’t. I just don’t want my roommate falling into depravity.”

“I’m not gonna do anything like that.”

Depravity wasn’t my thing. Despite having a big bank balance in my past life, I’d spent most of it living as a frugal no-lifer. If I’d been the hedonistic type, I would’ve been busy smoking weed, gambling, and going to hostess bars. I didn’t have the best self-control, but I was no big spender.

“Then what will you use it for? Going to save it?”

Sounds like something a grandma would suggest.

“It’ll be an up-front investment,” I reassured her.

“An up-front what?”

“Well... It’s like if someone buys a good spear because they know a war’s coming.”

That wasn’t the same thing at all, but I couldn’t be bothered to explain it to her.

“Oh. That’s a good way to think. If that’s how you’re using it, I’m impressed.”

That seemed to improve her mood considerably. She sounded like someone praising a student for buying a textbook in preparation for an exam.



I’d gotten myself a patent for paper, but I had to actually make some if I wanted a business.

As my initial capital, I had the thirty thousand ruga I’d just received, plus some savings I’d collected over the course of a few years. In total, I had fifty thousand ruga.

Fifty thousand was a high sum, equivalent to about five million Japanese yen. However, direct comparisons between the two currencies could be misleading. Though food was incredibly cheap in the kingdom, manufactured goods were expensive.

Given our low level of industrialization, manufactured goods were all made in a way that could be used to describe individual, handmade items in Japan. Naturally, that made them expensive. For example, a laundry basket cost about one hundred yen in Japan. That was about one ruga if converted to the local currency. However, the basket-making process here involved wooden strips woven together by hand, so they could fetch as much as fifty ruga in reality. Even a basket made by a peasant farmer with no other work to do during the winter would still be incredibly time consuming, so the price would never be as low as one ruga.

Looking at it another way, it was possible to live very cheaply as long as you gave up all luxuries. Indeed, many people here stayed in the cheapest rooms, ate nothing but dry salted meat along with mixed-grain bread, and did little but sleep when they weren’t working. With a lifestyle like that, someone could live

on ten thousand ruga for about a year, even in the royal capital.

A lack of any employment regulations in the city made labor cheap. An employee could hire someone for a salary of just ten thousand ruga, but they might pay thirteen thousand to avoid looking heartless.

Living in the dorm meant I had no living expenses of my own, so it would seem as though fifty thousand ruga would be enough to hire three or four unskilled adult workers for a year. In reality, however, I'd also need to use some of the money to pay the rent on a workshop, as well as some for investing in equipment.

I knew that primitive techniques for making both western paper and Japanese washi involved a papermaking mold. Since I'd never worked in a papermaking factory, however, I only had a basic idea of how to use one, much less how to make one in the first place.

These unknowns made it difficult to guess how long it would take before I had marketable paper, or how much I'd end up spending in the process. Fifty thousand ruga *was* a large sum, but not enough to give me confidence.

Another problem was, despite all my free time, I was no less busy during my mornings. That meant I couldn't work day and night on this project. I also had three remaining lecture slots that fell on afternoons, so I'd need someone I could trust operations to while I wasn't around.

One option was to simply do everything myself. Rather than hiring help, I could use my money to rent a hut by the waterside where I'd work on prototypes when I had time. I could rethink my strategy once I'd found the right production method. It wasn't a bad idea.

I'd never learned anything about management because I'd never particularly wanted to run my own company. Going solo would at least allow me to build up some experience before I hired anyone. Even a management student wouldn't find much to complain about with that sort of careful approach.

I was sitting down to lunch in the dining hall and giving the matter some much-needed, careful consideration when Myalo appeared.

"Is there something on your mind?" he asked as he took the seat next to

mine.

He didn't have any food. He must've spotted my troubled expression and stopped by for a chat.

"This and that," I replied.

"Maybe you could talk it over with me."

He seemed genuinely eager to listen. Myalo was a good person to talk to about this sort of thing. In fact, he might've been the *best* possible person.

"I want to start a business, but I'm not sure whether someone should help me manage it."

"A business?" Myalo looked surprised.

"I've got too much free time—I've finished almost all of my afternoon classes."

"Heh. What a nice problem to have."

Since we'd only been there five years, most students were still extremely busy with a ton of compulsory classes. He was right that I couldn't complain, but I still had to do something to make up for my lack of an occupation.

"You'll have the same problem eventually, Myalo. Three years from now, you'll be as bored as I am."

"I'm not so sure. I've been struggling so much with practical classes that I may need that extra time to build up my strength."

Ah, good point.

Myalo wasn't lying—we'd never once been put in the same training session because we'd been in separate classes ever since our first year.

There was nothing wrong with his reflexes, but he just couldn't seem to build muscle. He was still as scrawny as ever despite his daily training. It wasn't such an issue when he practiced with a dagger, but spears required strength that he just didn't have. Even with a short spear, it wasn't possible to completely avoid clashing with the opponent. Myalo was always at a disadvantage.

"It's not going to stop you graduating, is it?" I asked.

It would cause serious problems for knight families if their only son had a lack of aptitude for physical activities and couldn't graduate.

"No, but I'm sure I'll be over the age of twenty by the time I do."

Myalo probably would've preferred to graduate as soon as possible. Unfortunately for him, studying hard wasn't enough in this school.

"Sounds tough. Hmm..."

"But let's not talk about me. I want to hear more about your problem."

Ah, yeah. We went off track there. What were we talking about just now?

"I need personnel..." I said.

"Okay. What sort of personnel?" Myalo looked interested. It was reassuring to know that he was willing to take me seriously.

"I'm going to make and sell a new product, but it's not as simple as stocking up on some local delicacy. I need someone who can think creatively. I won't have much use for someone who knows nothing but shopkeeping and sales talk."

"I see. I'm sure the product is secret, so I won't ask, but it sounds like an average employee wouldn't meet your needs."

I wasn't keeping secrets. He could've asked me if he wanted to. Since I already had the patent, anyone copying my idea would be required to pay patent usage fees. Though if anyone else thought they could make paper before me, I'd like to see them try.

"Is there some sort of merchant's guild where I can interview applicants?"

"Ah..." Myalo knitted his brow. The question had bothered him.

"Hm?"

"The merchant's guilds in the capital are all under the control of the seven witches. It would be better for chieftain family members like you to stay away."

Huh? It's that bad?

"What a pain," I said.

“If you’re looking to hire people, you’d be wise to find someone from the Ho family’s own territory.”

“I see. Thing is, I’m stuck in the royal capital right now. I’d have to make them move out of Ho Province.”

I wasn’t fond of the idea. I felt like I’d cause a big fuss if I started rounding up people back home, and I wanted to keep my family out of it.

“If you’re looking for a merchant here in the capital, there *is* someone who comes to mind. I could introduce you.”

Seriously? He doesn’t just know everything, he’s got connections too. He’s always surprising me. It’s hard to believe he’s just fifteen.

“What are they like?”

“He was driven out of a trading firm that did regular business with my family.”

“They drove him out?”

It was wrong to judge without knowing all the details, but I already had a bad impression of him.

“Oh, he didn’t steal money from stores or anything like that. I think the issue was a difference in opinions.”

“Ahh.”

I guess I shouldn’t judge him without meeting him.

“Merchants who do regular business with witch families are often good at flattery and little else. The fact that he was a bad fit should actually give you peace of mind.”

“He can’t be all that bad if you’re recommending him.”

I decided I’d interview him to find out for myself. I couldn’t imagine Myalo suggesting someone who was completely incompetent or lazy and had only gotten by through sucking up to his family. His hate for witches makes that clear enough. I fully expected it to be someone with real talent. It was worth talking to him at the very least.

“It pleases me to know you think that way,” Myalo said with a slightly

embarrassed smile.

“How can I contact him?”

“I only know his name. I think the best option is to look up his address at the castle and then send him a letter.”

It was the first I’d heard of this method. The witches at the royal castle must’ve had an address book of sorts that they used to keep track of everyone in the capital. I was certain they were more than capable of carrying out their bureaucratic work with efficiency when they put their minds to it.

“All right. What’s his name?”

“Caph Ornette.”



Three days later, I was visiting Caph Ornette’s home. The apartment where he lived was in the eastern part of the city, on the north side of the river that ran through the capital.

I got the impression that the city’s second-class citizens lived in this district. This particular area was a little far from the markets, but close to the north harbor. It was ideal for merchants. Those who weren’t particularly rich were likely to choose this district as their home, while those with more wealth would live a little closer to the water. Its proximity to the river made it more convenient for anyone who wanted to shop at the markets or had regular business at the castle.

I climbed to the second floor of a stony three-story building, found the door with the right number, and knocked on it.

“Yeah, it’s open,” a voice called out from inside.

That struck me as careless. The district wasn’t very safe because it was home to numerous hungry Kilhinan refugees. Then again, a kid like me shouldn’t have been wandering around alone for the same reason.

“Excuse me.” I opened the door and stepped inside.

The interior was a once-familiar sight. I was greeted with mountains of trash piling up and a blanket of dust collecting on the floor. The areas where Caph

regularly walked were visible, like animal trails beaten into the dust.

It was through and through the messy room of a bachelor. I'd seen such sights every day in Japan—in my own home, that is—but I'd never seen anyone live like this in *this* world. None of my living spaces had ever gotten so bad. In the early days, Suzuya had always cleaned thoroughly, and then we'd had maids to do it in later years.

"Hello, sir. My name's Yuri Ho."

Caph Ornette was lying on a hard-looking sofa drinking alcohol. The arrival of a guest wasn't enough to make him sit up.

"Sorry, but...I don't have time to waste on some noble's kid."

"Oh, I see."

I didn't like his attitude one bit. I might've given up on him if it weren't for the fact that I *was* a kid. I couldn't blame him for being reluctant to waste his valuable time on me. On the other hand, it was obvious that he had nothing *but* time on his hands.

I was starting to think that his lifestyle might be even worse than I'd initially thought. If there'd been a hungry child with glazed eyes sitting in the corner, the room would've been like a scene from a painting.

"I'm planning on selling a product that I expect will dominate the parchment market in the future."

"Are you? Give up now, kid."

That's blunt. He's turning me away at the door. Should I just leave...? No, I've come all this way. I'll keep trying.

"I think I've got a chance. I won't know until I try."

"You don't. Even if you do, the scum'll take it all. There's no getting 'round it. That's how it works in this kingdom."

Caph sounded bitter, like he had a grudge against the world.

"I'll be fine. I've got an arrangement that'll prevent it from happening," I said.

"Hmpf." Caph laughed as though I'd just made a ridiculous claim.

“I’ve got a patent that says that anyone besides me, the inventor, who makes this product will have to pay me a fee. It was approved by Her Majesty. I’ve got the registration document on parchment, complete with her signature and the royal seal.”

I’d brought the document with me, just in case.

“I’ve never heard anything like that...”

“The system was established after I presented the idea to Her Majesty Queen Shimoné myself. I didn’t get into this business without considering the risks first.”

“Yeah? You set all that up?”

“Yes.”

Now Caph actually sat up and looked at me for the first time. When I saw him face-to-face, I saw how bad he really looked. He wasn’t ugly, but he was covered in dirt and in dire need of a shave.

“Bullshit. Show me.”

“Take a look.”

I was a little worried he might tear it up, but I handed over the document. It was written on pure white, high-quality parchment, so it was clearly genuine.

Caph ran his eyes across it.

“It’s the real deal,” he said.

“Yes, it is.”

“But what d’you need me for?”

Oh. Was that a hint of enthusiasm?

“General management and labor. Plus sales, once we’ve got a product to sell. Basically, I want you to do everything for me.”

“Is this a joke?” Caph’s expression was a mixture of suspicion and disbelief. It was a predictable reaction.

“I’ve got classes at the Knight Academy during my mornings. But I’ll work

when I have time, of course.”

“So I’ll do all the work, and you’ll drop by when you’ve got nothing better to do?”

“It sounds bad when you put it that way, but you’re more or less right. By the way, I haven’t figured out how to make the product yet. I’m thinking we can start by making some prototypes.”

“And you think I’ll work for free in the meantime?”

“I’m offering a fixed salary, though it won’t be too generous at first. We can discuss how to properly compensate you for your work once the product’s selling.”

Caph sighed. He still looked unsure—both about the prospect and my sanity. “You really think you’ve got a chance?”

“If we can develop and manufacture the product, I’m predicting that parchment will completely disappear from the market within ten years.”

“Seriously...? The parchment guild is Lacramanus’s territory. They won’t stand for it.”

Great. More bad news.

Lacramanus was the fifth largest family of the seven witches. The royal capital was awash with these cretins. The city was a stagnant place where free markets and ideal business conditions were alien concepts.

“Well...I’ll deal with that. I’m the Ho family’s heir. With me as the company’s representative, we’ll have options.”

“What? Doesn’t that make your dad a real big shot?”

My name was right there on the document. Didn’t he read it?

“If they try to make trouble, it’ll just be threats and damage to our production sites. And that won’t start until we’ve got our product ready and we’re actively competing with their parchment. It’s not worth worrying about just yet.”

“All right, sure.”

“Once we’ve got production going, we won’t be using animal hide as the raw

material; we'll use the ordinary trees that are growing everywhere around us. Paper won't be as durable as parchment, but we can sell it for less than half the price. No matter how much influence the parchment guild has, they'll have no way to compete."

I'd been bothered by the high price and scarcity of conventional parchment. If plant-based paper was sold in large quantities for a lower price, it was bound to catch on. I knew there was demand for it.

"You sound plenty sure of yourself. But how can you prove it'll catch on?"

Prove it?

"Proof? You're asking whether I can guarantee that the product will sell well?"

"Yeah."

Ah... He's one of those people. Myalo must've pegged him all wrong.

"If you're stupid enough to ask a question like that, then I've made a big mistake coming here. I'll look elsewhere."

"What?" Caph Ornette scowled at me.

If anyone should be angry here, it's me.

"Even your average farmer knows that crop yields are largely down to luck. I'm taking on the witch families with a major venture. Of course there's no proof."

I hadn't come looking for some run-of-the-mill worker. I needed someone who could do more than perform manual labor under orders.

"This is going to be a huge challenge. I'm looking for a capable merchant who's going to be my partner throughout. Someone unwilling to take risks isn't even a merchant, in my opinion. If guaranteed profit is what you want, you'd be better off doing dirty work for the witches."

Caph reacted as if I'd just slapped him in the face.

If he's not the one, I'll look elsewhere. Maybe I won't be able to find anyone else, but I can always start the work by myself.

I turned and reached for the door knob.

“Wait,” he said. “You’re right.”

I turned around again to see Caph staring at me intently.

“It was a stupid question. Hire me. Please.”

“Did that clear your head?”

Caph’s eyes were filled with intensity. These were nothing like the drunken eyes I’d seen just a moment earlier.

“Yeah. Anything beats rotting in this place. If you’re up for it, then so am I. Let’s do this.”



“We’re still at the ideas phase here. Until we’ve actually made something, we’ve got to focus on production methods and forget everything else,” Caph said.

Now that he’d sobered up, he set his mind to concrete plans of action.

“That sounds sensible.”

Sadly, he was right.

“So let’s talk about production first. Tell me how we’ll make this paper of yours.”

“The raw material is made from plant fibers. We take those and form them into flat sheets.”

“Hmm. Like cloth?”

He catches on quick.

The properties of paper were closer to cloth than parchment. Although their uses were different, both cloth and paper could be made from plant fibers.

“To make cloth, you’d spin the thickest, most durable fibers you can get into thread, then weave those together,” I said.



“Yeah, that’s right,” he agreed.

“But paper doesn’t need to be woven. It doesn’t matter if it can be torn apart and no one’s going to clean it on a washboard. What we need instead is a smooth texture. If it has thick threads like cloth, a pen will catch on them.”

“All right... That makes sense. But if you want to make it cheap, our process needs to take a lot less time than cloth-making. If you’ve got a method in mind, let’s hear it.”

“We’d somehow break a plant down into fibers, immerse them in water, scoop them up as a flat layer using a fine sieve, compress that layer between two pieces of wood, and finally dry it to create the finished paper.”

“Ah... Like that. All right.” Caph looked thoughtful as he spoke, as if he was trying to picture each step.

“Do you foresee any problems?”

He remained silent. Just when I thought he was going to back down after we’d come so far, he slapped his knee with a loud smack.

“Problems? I see a whole bunch. But who cares? Let’s make that first sheet,” he said.

“All right. I worried you were having doubts,” I said, sharing my misplaced concern.

Caph laughed it off. “There’s no turning back now. Maybe I’ll jump ship if we go a year without making anything, but I’m not giving up *that* easily.”

“So, you’re on board?”

That’s a relief.

“Yeah, but I’ve got one condition,” Caph replied.

A condition?

“What’s that?”

“I don’t want a salary. I’m done with being a standard worker. Once we’re making money, I’ll find ways to up our profits and take a cut we’ve agreed on.”

“All right. You want to be paid a share rather than a salary. We can do that.”

If that’s what it took to get him motivated, I had no objections. Besides, his share of profits would be nothing unless we actually made money. It was an exciting way for someone to get involved in a daring new start-up.

“But I’ll warn you, I’ve got nothing to invest,” Caph said.

I can tell you’re not rich just by looking.

“Will the Ho family cover the company’s operating costs?” he asked.

“No. I’m doing this alone, so it’ll be paid out of my pocket. But all I have is fifty thousand ruga. It’s not going to last long.”

“Fifty thousand? It’ll do for now. We don’t need ships or horses while we’re not trading. I can’t imagine what our facilities are gonna look like, but about twenty thousand’ll cover ordinary tools for workers.”

An initial investment of twenty thousand was a huge expense compared to the cost of the frugal life I was used to, but I was ready to do what was needed to get the business going.

“All right. Let’s not waste any time,” Caph said.

III

“Hello,” I said.

“Hey there... I’m guessin’ you’re Yuri?”

“Yes, I’m Yuri. You must be Lilly Amian.”

I’d heard a lot about this calm, beautiful girl named Lilly from Sham, but I was secretly surprised by the sight of her.

She came across as sort of lazy, but her hair had been tied back into a very neat braid. Although she looked like a high schooler, she was quite buxom—a rarity amongst the typically slender Shanti. Her large chest was easy to see, even under her loose knitted sweater. I was going to have to work hard to keep my gaze from drifting downward.

“Did I say something funny just now?” she asked.

“No, not at all.”

Our meeting place was a teahouse close to the commoner districts; in other words, it was quite removed from the royal castle.

You could call our choice in attire a disguise. I’d told her via Sham to wear something casual so that we’d blend in here, away from our uniformed peers. Most academy students—couples, in particular—would meet up in the stylish, high-class teahouses near the academy. They were a poor choice for a secret meeting.

“You’re awful popular with the girls, Yuri. You’re good friends with Her Highness too. It’ll mean trouble if we’re caught meetin’ like this.”

Lilly must’ve been worried that rumors would spread through the academy. Given that she lived in a dorm with a lot of young girls, it was a rational concern. I still looked like a kid, but it wasn’t too far-fetched that someone might see this as a date.

I estimated that Lilly was seventeen.

“Now, what’re we here to talk about? Is it about Sham?”

Huh? Lilly sounded quite affectionate when she said Sham’s name. I had no idea the two of them were getting on so well. But we’re not here to talk about Sham.

“No, it’s because I heard you were good at making things.”

“Ah, so that’s it. What do you need?” Lilly wasn’t surprised in the least. Talks like this must’ve been a common thing for her.

“I need something with an array of little rods, as long and thin as possible, all in a row like this, and connected together by thread. It’s for a woodworking job.”

I would’ve liked to use bamboo, but we couldn’t find any this far north.

Lilly didn’t look too pleased. “Woodwork... I’ve got the proper tools, sure, but my specialty’s metalwork. Why not ask a carpenter?”

“None of the carpenters here in the capital understand what I’m trying to make. They think I’m some dumb kid and refuse to listen.”

I wanted a mold for making paper, but I'd gotten nowhere by talking to carpenters. If Lilly couldn't do it, I'd have to go on searching the capital until I found a carpenter willing to listen. But I had no idea whether I'd ever find one.

Lilly nodded her head.

"Ah, I see. Well, if that's how it is..."

"You'll make it for me?"

"Sure. I can't turn down an order from Yuri himself."

Thank god. We can't do a thing until we get that mold. What a relief.

"Thank you."

"But I won't promise I can do it. Don't get mad if I give up."

"Of course. That'd be my fault for requesting something unreasonable."

If it happens, it happens. I wouldn't blame her for it. No matter who I ask, there's always going to be that risk.

"Now maybe you'll tell me a little about your design," Lilly said.

"...and since we're using it in water, the threads connecting the rods together shouldn't fall apart when wet."

"Hmm. So basically, I'm makin' you a flat sieve?"

"Exactly. You catch on quick."

"I sure do." Lilly didn't hide the fact that my small compliment had pleased her. "Is there anythin' else you need?"

"I also need a box to keep it in."

"Is that all? How about I make that too? I'd hate to bother someone else over one little thing."

"I really appreciate it."

That's great. I still don't know if it's actually going to work, but it's progress.

Once we'd finished talking about the design, we enjoyed the tea we'd ordered.

“Sham tells me that you’re her teacher, Yuri,” Lilly said, casually changing the topic.

“I suppose I am.”

Small talk? I guess Sham’s not a bad topic to get a conversation going.

“Sham sure knows an awful lot. She tells me you discovered it all.”

Ugh, that’s a touchy subject. She must think I’m weird. And Sham’s so scientifically minded that she doesn’t tend to explain things in simple terms.

“That’s not true. You wouldn’t expect it from a glance, but I’m a scholar. I learn various things from a lot of different people,” I explained.

I wasn’t the least bit scholarly, but I had to say that to make my lie believable.

“Is that all? I’m not sure I buy it.”

“You don’t?”

A little thought revealed how implausible it was, but she’d just have to accept it. I had no other explanation for her.

“Not really...” she trailed off. Although she wasn’t scowling or studying me suspiciously, I could tell she was thinking, *What are you hiding?*

“There’s no limit to how much knowledge we can gain simply by studying,” I added.

“That so?”

It wasn’t vital that I convinced her, but I figured I’d try anyway. “For example, I’ve noticed that you narrow your eyes whenever you examine someone’s expression. Could it be that you’re struggling to see my face because of your poor eyesight?”

“You noticed...? My eyes ain’t great. My dad’s the same way.”

I knew it. That explains why she keeps narrowing her eyes, almost like she’s angry at me.

“You probably haven’t heard of glasses.”

“‘Glasses’? What’re those?”

“They’re an item you wear that holds two miniature glass lenses in front of your eyes. A good-quality pair wouldn’t just help you see my face—you’d be able to see distant mountains clearly.”

“There’s a device like that?” Her expression changed markedly.

Lilly was clearly interested. And no wonder—someone with bad eyesight and no glasses to compensate for it could find even the simplest of tasks to be much more challenging. Her vision had to be pretty bad if she had to squint to see my face while I was sitting no more than a meter away from her. The idea of a device that could fix her problem was bound to grab her interest.

“Would you assume that such an item was my idea?” I asked.

“Well... Ain’t it? There’s an awful lot of Cultural Academy girls with poor eyes, but none that wear these things you’re talkin’ about.”

“There’s one person at the academy who wears glasses.”

“Someone at the Knight Academy?”

“No. The Kulati refugee who teaches Kulatish.”

“Oh... I see.” Lilly quickly understood what I was telling her.

“You know the teacher, Ether Vino? Glasses have already been invented and popularized in Kulati nations.”

“Really? They’re sure makin’ progress. Now I’m awful jealous.”

“Indeed. If we could make the same thing ourselves, everyone could wear them. No one notices their value.”

As stupid as that sounded, it wasn’t rare. I’d heard similar stories before. Even for nations like Japan that had opened themselves up to the world, it could take many years to introduce machines that were being sold in foreign countries, despite the great increase in work efficiency they’d bring. Knowledge of those machines took time to reach people, after all.

“So why hasn’t this teacher tried to sell us this ‘glasses’ idea?”

“Ms. Ether was a clergy member for a Kulati religion. Worldly desires like money aren’t of much concern to her.”

“Hmm. I get it.”

“The point is, advancements that most people wouldn’t have thought of are always happening. We just don’t notice them.”

“But you notice because you’re such a scholar?”

“Essentially, yes.”

She had to accept my explanation to some extent now that I’d given an example.

“Why do I get the feeling you’re bein’ evasive?” she asked.

“That aside, glasses are useful to have. You’ll be surprised how clear they make the world look,” I said, forcing her to change the topic.

“Can’t say I’m not interested.”

She knew I was just being evasive again, but her thoughts were now focused on the glasses.

“Ms. Ether speaks fluent Shanish, and she’s very approachable. Why not ask if she’ll lend you a pair? They won’t help much unless they’re made especially for you, though.”

“Because of how they work?”

“Yes. The curvature of the lens is chosen to compensate for how bad your eyes are.”

“Hmm.”

“And if you have one eye with better vision than the other... You should ask Sham about this. I think she’ll be able to explain the gist of it.”

By this point, we’d spent too long talking already. I had to excuse myself. We both left the teahouse separately.

Half of my motivation for the meeting had been to see Sham’s roommate for myself. Her wits were sharp, and yet she was laid back. I was glad that I’d met her.

Lilly must've taken to the work swiftly. Just a week later, she'd produced a papermaking mold of about the right size. It felt a little too big in my hands, but it was just like I'd ordered. Given that an adult would be using it, the size was probably just fine.

Any metal parts—like the handles—were made of bronze. That was ideal, because they wouldn't rust like iron.

The screen that was meant to separate the fibers from the water was firmly held together by fine thread, and wooden beams that held it in place from above and below were also more than sturdy enough without being overly heavy. I had no worries about it falling apart. Lilly had done a great job.

Once I had it, I decided to meet with Caph right away. I carried the bulky papermaking mold over to Caph's apartment and found the place messier than ever. Odds and ends were rapidly accumulating in his home.

"Ah, there you are," Caph said from the sofa.

He was holding a large pair of tailoring scissors and cutting up some old clothing into rags.

"How's that look?" Caph gestured with his eyes toward a large washtub in the center of the room.

I couldn't imagine where he'd found it. The tub was large enough that you might expect three or four housewives to stand around and use it at the same time. If it hadn't been so shallow, it might've even been big enough to fill with hot water and bathe in. It was already full to the brim, and the floor around it was soaked with water that had spilled over.

"I think that'll work, but let's try it out to be sure."

I unwrapped the mold that I'd brought and placed it in the tub while keeping my grip on the handles. The tub was circular, but it was big enough for the mold to fit in the middle.

"This is the device you came up with, is it?" Caph asked while closely examining the item. He'd already seen the diagrams I'd made beforehand, but it was something else entirely to see the real thing.

“Yes. We should be able to start with this.”

I looked at the side of the tub and noticed baskets filled with various materials, including scraps of thread from clothes that had been cut into rags. I didn't know where he'd gotten them all, but he'd been preparing some when I'd entered.

“This is enough raw material. You did well.”

“Not bad, right?” Caph noted proudly.

Life took on a much greater significance when someone took pride in their own work. After having recovered from the terrible state he was in, he was probably enjoying himself.

The apartment was still filled with trash, but the reek of alcohol was gone. He must've cleaned up the empty bottles, because they'd all disappeared.

“Let's get right to it, then. Which material looks best?”

“This one, I think.” I pointed to one of the baskets.

There were a large amount of white fibers that resembled cotton inside. They fell apart easily when I held them between my fingertips, and they also looked suitably long and thin.

“Those? I got all that from a wholesaler. They said it was waste.”

“I see... It looks like good material to me. Let's put it in the water.”

“Already? All right.”

I held the basket above the tub and turned it upside down, spilling the contents into the water.

I rolled up my sleeves, plunged my hands in, and gave it a stir. The material began to fall apart as it moved through the water.

Now that the threads formed an ideal suspension, the remaining issue was whether the holes in the mold's screen were small enough to catch the fibers. We just needed a fine film at first in order to catch more fibers and increase the sheet's thickness.

“I'll give it a try,” I said.

“All right. Let’s see how it’s done.”

The mold felt too big for me as I picked it up, but I managed to plunge it into the tub and swish it around.

A thin film quickly formed on its surface. Once that had happened, each movement made the layer grow thicker. Once it had bulked up enough to be opaque, I tilted the mold to pour out the water, then lifted it up.

The work was over surprisingly quickly. It hadn’t even taken five minutes.

I detached the screen from the mold and removed it, along with the layer of paper that was resting on top. I now had a sheet of freshly made, soaking wet paper. I tried lifting a corner. Though it felt ready to fall apart any moment, it held together.

On closer examination, I realized that the right side was thicker than the left, probably because I was right-handed. If I tried to compress this, the pressure would only be felt on one side, making it a failure as a prototype.

But it was close. I might get better at making it if I practiced two or three times. This mold was merely for testing the concept. I hadn’t even been confident it would capture any fibers at all, so this was a nice surprise.

“If we were to compress this somehow, it would force the water out while it’s drying.”

“All right. Let me have a go.” Caph was itching to get involved.

“Let’s put this one back in the tub.”

“Huh?”

I peeled the freshly made piece of paper off the screen and put it back into the tub. It broke apart in the water as I stirred it back in, returning to its original form.

“You can put them back? Then I’ll be able to practice as much as I want.”

“That’s right. I expect the sheet will be more durable if we have fibers that run in alternating directions. Let’s experiment with different approaches.”

“Good thinking.”

We made paper sheets from various different materials and placed them on top of each other between two wooden boards with a weight on the top. The day's work was finished once we'd wiped the floor dry.

"Let's try leaving it to dry for three days."

"Three whole days?" Caph sounded surprised.

You can't even pickle a vegetable properly in just one day, so maybe three.

"Yes, sir. It might be that one day is enough, but we can try shorter times later."

"You're right. No need to get hasty," Caph agreed.

"It's like they say: haste makes waste."

"That's a nice way to put it."

"Well, that's our work done for today."

"Guess so."

"I'm going to rest for a moment, then I'm heading back to the dorm. It's growing late already."

Although I'd gotten here around noon, the sun was already setting. It made me realize just how long I'd spent working with Caph.

"By the way, I forgot to ask—where'd you hear about me?"

Oh, we didn't talk about that?

I realized that the letter of introduction I'd originally sent to Caph didn't have Myalo's name anywhere on it. It may have explained why he'd been so difficult at first. Normally, such a letter would say, "I am writing to you after having received a recommendation from so-and-so." I'd forgotten to do that out of carelessness.

"From a classmate named Myalo," I replied.

"Myalo? I haven't got any friends your age."

They don't know each other? Myalo must know Caph better than Caph knows him.

“Oh? You’re sure you don’t know a Myalo Gudinveil?”

“What...?” Myalo’s surname seemed to bring back memories for Caph.

“Did you ever see someone at the Gudinveil household with chestnut-colored hair and, um...a slim figure? That’s Myalo Gudinveil.”

“Ah... Gudinveil... Yes, I remember now,” Caph said solemnly. He looked quite moved.

“It sounds like you know who I’m talking about. When I said I needed a competent and versatile merchant, Myalo gave me your name.”

“Me...?”

What’s this? Did something important happen between those two?

“Sorry, but could you leave for today?” Caph said.

“Huh? Sure. I don’t mind.”

I was already on my way out anyway.

“I can’t hold these tears back.”

Huh? Is it really that emotional for him? Well, I’d rather not see a grown man cry. Time to go.

“I understand. Goodbye, sir.”

I quickly turned around and hurried toward the exit.

“Hey,” Caph called to me. “Spare me the polite talk next time, would you? That’s no way for a boss to talk to an employee.”

“Oh... In that case, see you around, Caph.”

I left the apartment and closed the door behind me.

V

A month later, I was headed to a Kulatish lecture. I could’ve skipped it because I’d already gotten the credits in my second year, but I worried that I would forget everything I’d learned if I never used the language at all.

I'd never come into contact with anyone speaking a foreign language in this kingdom under ordinary circumstances. Without these lectures, there wouldn't be a single opportunity to speak Terolish. I had to drop by at least occasionally to refresh my knowledge.

When I entered the lecture theater on that particular day, Ms. Ether hadn't arrived yet, but there was another familiar face waiting for me.

It was Harol—the merchant who'd sailed overseas to a Terolish-speaking region.

"Hey! Long time no see," he greeted me cheerfully.

He must've spent a long time traveling because his tan was much darker than the last time I'd seen him.

"Long time no see is right... But what happened? I've been worried."

I'd often thought about him because his venture had originally been my idea. After he'd been gone for a month, I'd given up hope and assumed the worst. Twice I'd dreamed about him and gotten chills. I'd been praying for him, hoping his spirit would finally pass on to the other side. It turned out he was alive the whole time.

"Oh, really? Sorry about that."

"The important thing is that you're alive. I honestly thought you were dead because you disappeared for half a year."

"So I've been told over and over again. It's enough to make my ears ring," Harol said while sticking his pinkie into his ear.

Well, yeah. No wonder.

"Share some stories of your travels later, would you?"

"Sure thing. I've gotta say thanks to Ms. Ether first, though."

"Ah, yeah. That's a good idea."

Ms. Ether had advised Harol on where to find trading partners. If she'd given him bad advice, Harol might never have returned.

Our teacher entered the classroom while we were talking. She looked over at

her students. Although she appeared surprised for a moment when she spotted Harol, her expression quickly turned into a warm smile. It was cute.

“Let’s begin the lecture.”

Once the lesson was over, we headed to Ms. Ether’s office in the academy. To be more specific, it was originally a place to put lecture materials together, but since it had been unused, it was currently serving as Ms. Ether’s personal research area.

Ms. Ether came to work every day even though she only gave one Kulatish lecture each week. Whenever I had a question about my self-study or wanted to know about something beyond the curriculum, I could visit her there. I couldn’t master the language with just what was taught in the lectures, so I’d visited her quite a lot to learn extra Terolish.

“Please have a seat.”

Ms. Ether offered chairs to her two students; I sat on a small stool.

“You made it back. I’m happy to see you again.”

Ms. Ether spoke in Shanish. She’d mastered the language over the course of a few years. There was no longer anything in her speech that sounded unnatural.

“And that’s all thanks to you.” Without standing up from his seat, Harol gave her an exaggerated bow with his whole body.

“Well, I’m glad. My daily prayers for you must have been answered.”

“Huh? You prayed for me every day?”

Daily prayers sounded like a big deal.

I was impressed too. It made me think of people making daily visits to Shinto shrines in Japan. Ms. Ether must’ve been worrying this whole time about how well her advice had served Harol.

“Yes, but I pray every day already,” Ms. Ether explained.

Oh. It’s like that. She made it sound like she’d been pleading to her god for his safe return the whole time. I guess not.

Ms. Ether had been exiled from—or fled from—her home country after being

declared a heretic, but she hadn't left her faith behind. She looked more like a researcher than a priestess, so it was easy to forget sometimes, but she was as pious as she'd ever been.

"Oh, I see what you mean." Harol looked a little disappointed, but relieved at the same time.

"How did your travels go?"

"I had a lot of close calls, but everything worked out."

It sounded like he'd successfully negotiated a trade deal.

"I see. I was terribly worried. I thought perhaps it had been irresponsible of me to advise you to travel to a country that I've never once visited myself."

"Even you didn't know the country?" I asked her.

"I didn't. It's known as the Albio Republic. I hesitated to recommend it because the people have a reputation for being aggressive."

"Why did he need to visit a place like that?"

A country with violent citizens sounded like an unsafe place to be, but perhaps it was also a place with many legal loopholes.

"Yeesusism is a religion made up of multiple different sects. The Albio Republic belongs to the Carulgi sect, which is seen as heretical by members of the mainstream Catholica sect. Carulgi's adherents don't have a custom of discriminating against the Shanti people."

"Huh."

Yeesusism was a major religion, and Ms. Ether was one of its followers. This was the mainstream religion of the Terolish-speaking world. In fact, it was the direct cause of the Shantila Empire's ruin in the distant past; the religion decried the Shanti as a race of demons.

All adherents of Yeesusism were monotheistic and worshiped the same god, so I'd been under the belief that they all considered the Shanti to be a race of demons. The teachings they followed shouldn't have varied significantly.

"How'd they come to have different beliefs? Do they follow a different holy

text?” I asked.

“No, not at all. The holy scriptures that Lord Yeesus originally gave us said nothing negative about the Shanti.”

Huh?

“In the days when Lord Yeesus lived among us, the Shanti and the Kulati weren’t even considered two different species. The scripture makes a reference to the ‘hairy-eared people of the north,’ but the Shanti play no important role in the text. I doubt anyone thought anything other than ‘they must have hair growing from their ears because they live in cold places.’”

That can’t be right.

The Kulati had assembled armies—crusaders, in their words—countless times with the aim of exterminating the Shanti.

When crusaders had arrived in the neighboring kingdom of Kilhina about ten years ago, their declaration of war had been fairly aggressive. “We come in service of the son of God, that we might deliver retribution without mercy to you demons who persistently defile these sacred lands. If you feel shame for your deeds and wish for the purification of what you have tainted, then surrender yourselves to us, and in his great compassion, God will surely bestow a fragment of his love upon you. We bid you, repent.”

It was clear that they treated us as nonhumans to be exterminated. Whether they truly *believed* what they said was beside the point. All that mattered was that they had a justification they could use for plundering our towns and enslaving our people.

If the interpretation Ms. Ether had just given us was correct, then it would create a contradiction. Their justification wouldn’t stand if it wasn’t consistent with what was written in their own holy texts.

“But Ms. Ether, doesn’t that contradict the teachings of the Catholica sect?” I asked.

“Yes. Sadly, it does.”

So there is a contradiction.

“The original texts of Yeesus were compiled two thousand years ago. They were written in an ancient language known as Totish that is no longer spoken. The sacred texts used by the Catholica sect are a Terolish translation. Although it’s the officially recognized translation of the text, it contains an intentional mistranslation that describes the Shanti as the ‘hairy-eared demons of the north.’ It’s nothing short of an affront to God.”

Ms. Ether’s rage became visible on her face as she described how the holy texts had been intentionally corrupted for the sake of justifying an invasion.

“Totish is such an incredibly difficult language that not even one in ten thousand people are capable of reading the original holy texts. It means that most people can’t read the original to learn the true teachings for themselves, and the official translation has been accepted blindly.”

“Is Totish really that difficult?”

“Well... For example, it has twelve different words just for ‘person’ alone. People can be classified as nyaa, sachaat, kлага, helanas, hafshreka, felnas, elhetnika, and more.”

There must’ve been people dreaming up ridiculous languages in more countries than one.

According to this academy’s Ancient Shanish teacher—a genuine expert in ancient languages who most people considered insane—modern day Shanish was little better than the ravings of a chimp because it lacked the rich expressiveness of more complex written languages.

“The original text used the word ‘hafshreka’ to refer to the Shanti, which was then translated to ‘demon.’ The original nuance is ‘foreigner,’ so a more accurate translation of the relevant part of the scripture is ‘the story was heard by the hairy-eared foreign people of the north.’ In fact, the officially recognized translation used this same wording back before the mistranslation was introduced. Now that there are virtually zero Totish speakers outside of the clergy, they’re free to distort the meaning of passages in the official translation as they please.”

That clearly didn’t sit well with Ms. Ether. At this point I’d guessed that the whole reason she was deemed a heretic was because she’d said all of this to

senior clergy members.

“But the Albio Republic follows a different interpretation?”

“Yes. The Carulgi sect followed in Albio branched off in the days when the Shantila Empire still existed. Since the sect formed before the corrupted holy texts were introduced, they’re free from their influence.”

In the days when the empire still existed... That’s a long time ago. We’re talking over nine hundred years.

“The Carulgi sect was established as the religious faith of a country known as the Carulginion Empire, after the collapse of the Xurxes Holy Empire. Carulginion was ruined after a war against the Catholica sect, but an island nation known as the Albio Republic is still at war with various Catholica nations.”

So this weirdly named Carulginion Empire might’ve collapsed, but there are still survivors holed up and fighting from some remote region?

“Which island is the Albio Republic on?” I asked.

“It’s reached by passing through a short stretch of open water after leaving from the coast of the Flushia Kingdom near the open ocean.”

Those words didn’t mean much to me.

“Um... I don’t suppose you could lend me a pen and some ink?”

“Yes, no problem.”

I took some paper from my bag and put it on the desk.

“Oh, is that plant-based paper? I’ve never seen it in this country before,” Ms. Ether remarked.

Apparently, it had already been invented in Kulati territories.

“I came up with the idea, but it sounds like I wasn’t the only one. Someone in the Kulati nations must’ve thought of it too.”

I played it cool, but if they already had paper, it suggested their technology was way ahead of ours.

“Let’s have a look,” Harol said, finally joining the conversation. All the difficult

talk had bored him, but now he was interested.

“Go ahead and examine this one all you like.” I took another piece from my bag and handed it to Harol.

Using a pen I borrowed from Ms. Ether, I drew a simplistic map on the page I’d brought out earlier. Our paper was getting easier to write on lately.

“Oh, what a well-drawn map,” she praised me.

“Is it somewhere on here?” I asked.

“Of course. It’s here,” she said as she pointed to Ireland.

“What about the island next to it?” I asked, motioning over to Britain. In the world I remembered, England was on this island.

“That’s known as Great Albio Island. The northern regions are part of the Albio Republic, but the south is territory of the Euphos Federation. The two islands are collectively known as the Albio Isles, and the Albio Republic longs to control both islands in their entirety. Albio has long been at war with the nations on the continent for that reason. It’s famous for its pirates.”

This world had no United Kingdom to speak of—the island of Britain was divided into north and south halves that were constantly at war. The reason our country was never invaded from the seas had to be down to Albio’s efforts.

“What sort of beliefs does Catholica involve?” I asked.

“Well... That’s a very difficult question to answer.”

Even a specialist has trouble answering?

“Firstly, modern Catholica can’t accurately be called a sect. The group’s cowardly efforts to transform the teachings mean that Catholica merely follows the opinions of its pope, and I think it’s better described as a war alliance than a religious group. Little remains of the original faith that was preached by Catholica Wichita. The interpretation that says the Shanti are demons is just one example of a more recent teaching.”

Religious leaders must’ve warped the faith as they saw fit over many generations. I got the impression that a desire for authority and personal profit had corrupted it, warping it into something far from its original form.

“Then what about Carulgi?”

“It’s a religion full of crude teachings, originally started by a warrior monk. It was born out of an aversion toward the Catholica of the time, so even its interpretation of the sacraments is considered heretical.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t even ask, but...which sect do you follow, Ms. Ether?”

Based on everything she’s said, I’m guessing Catholica.

“I belong to the Me sect,” she answered with a broad smile.

“Huh?”

Mii sect? Is that some new denomination?

“The Me sect is a set of teachings that I came up with myself. It’s largely based on early Catholica, but I’ve refined it in the course of my research.”

I thought maybe I’d misheard, but she really did say “Me sect.” It sounded like a name a kid might give to a form of martial arts they invented themselves.

“O-Oh. Are you the only adherent of the Me sect?”

“Yes. Trying to teach it to others almost got me killed, so it’ll probably begin and end with me.”

So that’s what did it. That’s why she had to flee to this remote country. She risked her life for it.



“Oh... That’s a shame.”

“I’m not upset about it. Faith in its truest form resides within the self, and that’s enough for me. Someone who can’t be comfortable with their faith unless it’s shared by countless other people is merely following mob mentality as a result of their human failings. That’s something I realized since coming here.”

It sounded like Ms. Ether was finding herself. She probably refined the Me sect with each passing day.

At this point, Harol chimed in. “I don’t understand all this complicated talk, but do you think you could teach this Me sect to me? I’m interested in this Yeesusism religion.”

What? Is he serious?

“Of course. I have no problem with that if it’s your wish.”

“Really?! Great!”

What’s gotten into him? I haven’t known him long, but I never thought he was the religious type.

But then I remembered that Harol had been to the Albio Republic. He might’ve felt a strong need to deepen his understanding of the region’s religion. In which case, there was nothing strange about him asking to learn more about the subject.

“If there are other students asking for language lessons outside of classes, I’ll have to prioritize them. But any other time is fine.”

“Of course.” Harol smiled happily.



After Harol and I had said our goodbyes to Ms. Ether, we headed for a tavern.

“They haven’t got wine,” Harol lamented as he read the menu.

Wine generally wasn’t available in Shiyalta because it was impossible to cultivate grapes here.

“That’s a shame. You’ll have to make do with beer,” I said.

“Suppose so. There’s no beer better than Shiyalta’s. The local brew’s always the best, isn’t it? What’ll you have?”

“Me? Hmm... Milk.”

“What? Can’t handle alcohol?”

The Shanti tended to have a high tolerance for alcohol and often drank heavily. Though alcohol wasn’t generally considered suitable for children, there was no rule that said we couldn’t drink before the age of twenty—unlike in Japan. They didn’t serve it in the dining hall, of course, but even the students in the dorm drank often.

“I’ve decided I won’t start drinking until I reach twenty.”

I didn’t think it would cause me harm, but I couldn’t be sure. I wasn’t so in love with alcohol that I couldn’t live without it, so abstaining for a while longer was no big deal.

“Is that some rule you students follow? You don’t have to stick to it here.”

“No, it’s just a rule that I set for myself. I’ve also got other things I need to do today.”

“Ah. Hey!” Harol called the waiter over and ordered his drink.

Harol received the beer instantly, and he downed it all in one go like the sailor that he was.

“Fwah... That’s good stuff.”

He was uninhibited when it came to drinking. It made the beer look good—I even felt tempted to try some myself. Rook tended to drink spirits, but he never gulped his beer quickly when he did have it.

“Now let’s hear some tales from your travels,” I said.

“Ah. Sure. So to start off, I’d set sail for Great Albio Island. I’ll spare you the problems we had at sea. Main thing is I got there.”

“No, don’t skip over that. Tell me what the voyage was like.”

“What it was like?” Harol echoed.

“Well, you couldn’t follow the coastline. It must’ve been tough.”

There weren't any nautical charts in this country to guide someone to Great Albio Island accurately, and there certainly weren't any precise positioning devices like GPS.

Seafaring was a difficult business. Once a ship was out in open water with no land in sight, it would quickly lose track of its position. In fact, it might never reach land at all if it headed even slightly in the wrong direction. For an inland sea like the Baltic or Mediterranean, it was always possible to reach the shore eventually, but on a great ocean like the Atlantic, a lost ship was often a lost cause. Its crew was likely to run out of food and drinking water, resulting in their deaths while they were still adrift.

Coastal navigation made things easier because the navigator could simply check that land was always visible to the right or the left. The problem was that the Albio Republic couldn't be easily reached by following a coastline. Plus, some of the land along the way belonged to a hostile nation, which left them with no choice but to sail across the open sea.

"We've got this old man who handles all the navigation. I left it to him."

You left it all up to someone else?

"You left it to him to do...what, exactly? Guess the way?"

"I wouldn't normally call it *guessing*, but...basically, yeah."

He was gambling with his life right from the start.

"But we got there, and we dropped our anchor in some sort of uninhabited valley."

"All right."

"Then, after we climbed ashore, these people came swarming out from the forest."

"Huh?"

"They caught us. Turns out it was a pirate stronghold."

"Wow..."

I already knew he made it out alive, but I had to wonder how.

“So they asked us in Terolish, ‘What regiment are you with?’ I’d never wanted to thank Ms. Ether more. I told them exactly who we were: ‘I’m a merchant. We’re Shanti from the peninsula.’”

You did?

“They told me I was full of it, so I took off my hat and let them see my ears. You should’ve seen their faces.”

I could imagine how shocked they were. As pirates, they’d immediately think that some foreign navy had been sent to eliminate them, only for the crew to foolishly wander ashore and let themselves get surrounded. But then it turned out they were foreigners from a distant land in the north. They couldn’t have predicted that.

“Then we started drinking.”

Wait. Hold on a minute.

“Why’d you start drinking? How come there wasn’t a fight?”

“‘Cause they’re seamen. Helping someone lost at sea’s just common decency. You don’t steal from people in that situation.”

“Really?”

My impression of pirates made it hard for me to believe that they’d behave like that, but what did I know about pirate culture?

It was so common to get lost at sea that I could imagine a system where ships helped each other out when they went adrift. I doubted the practice was widespread, but it was plausible that seamen from a maritime nation like the Albio Republic lived by that rule. It was an interesting bit of culture if true.

“Not that we’d ever drifted off course, mind you. Anyway, we had a drink. That turned into a drinking contest. Let me tell you, we showed them a thing or two.”

“I’m glad you had fun.”

It sounded like an incredibly fortunate way to make contact. If things had gone just slightly differently, they might have gotten a bad ending that saw them all killed and their cargo stolen.

“Yeah. So I left my crew in the pirates’ village while I headed for the capital.”

“They let your crew rest in the village? That was kind of them.”

“Obviously, they wanted money for food and lodgings.”

“Oh, of course.”

The money in this case must have been Shiyaltan gold coins. Since they contained actual gold, they held an intrinsic value that wasn’t affected by what currency it happened to be. Even so, we were like barbarians to them, so it was surprising they’d let the crew stay.

“We’d landed on the Great Albio Island that you were talking to Ms. Ether about. I had to take a ferry to get over to Minor Albio Island. The capital’s name was Byron’s Peak, and it was on the smaller island.”

“Oh.”

The southern half of the island of Great Britain was controlled by a different nation, so they were lucky they’d happened to drift ashore at the northern part that corresponded to Scotland.

“Their royal capital-type place isn’t as big as Sibiak. Anyway, I made it there.”

“You did well.”

Learning a language was one thing, using it to travel through a foreign country alone like that was another entirely.

“To start with, I spent a few days in a tavern getting drunk and having fights.”

Wait, what?

“Fights?”

“Maybe it’s just me, but I think it’s normal for sailors. We spend day after day on the water. Once you’ve finally got your feet on the ground, you wanna spend a few days raising hell in a tavern. I only fought with other sailors, of course.”

“I see.”

That’s what sailors do? Their culture just sounds weird to me. It’s like every one of them’s another Dolla.

“Then a messenger from the government came to the place I’d been staying at. I got invited to see them.”

Wh-What?

“The next day, they took me to this massive, fancy hall where all these important people were waiting. I told them my business right then and there. Said I was there to trade, and I had no idea whether I needed permission first, but I didn’t mean any harm. Or something along those lines, anyway.”

Sounds good to me. At least he didn’t say anything to embarrass our kingdom.

“I got permission, no problem. Well, it wasn’t really *permission*—turns out I didn’t need it in the first place. So what I *should* say is that trading’s not forbidden.”

“Were these people parliamentary officials?”

“Something like that. I asked around several times, so I’m sure it was the closest thing they’ve got to Shiyalta’s royal castle. Turns out they haven’t got kings or queens in republics.”

Well, yeah. Otherwise it’d be a kingdom.

“Republic” generally referred to a state with some sort of elected government rather than a monarchy.

“Was their parliament a gathering of the most influential nobles?”

“They looked like it. From what I’ve heard, you buy a noble rank there. Apparently, some of them are pirate bosses and big merchants.”

Despite being a republic, it sounded like all the power was held by some sort of aristocracy or oligarchy. They almost certainly didn’t have democracy or universal voting rights.

“Then, after the council had finished, I accepted a bunch of invitations. The next day, they took me to the harbor and introduced me to some people there. I made a good number of contacts.”

He really did get lucky. Things couldn’t have gone better.

“Then I went back to the village and boarded our ship again so we could go

back to Byron's Peak. We'd filled the ship with cargo that might sell just in case. I sold off what I had when we got there, then left the ship in the harbor. They were really surprised when they saw the ship—said it's outdated."

Byron's Peak was the capital he mentioned, wasn't it? Now I know they not only have better paper, but more advanced ships too. I'll bet everything's progressed much further there.

"I stayed docked there for about a week while I looked around the markets with some sort of accountant and figured out what I could buy to sell when I got back home. I brought back a range of goods and made a big profit selling it at markets. It's always like that—if you have something the area lacks, it sells fast."

All in all, Harol's voyage had been a big success.

"Well, that's good to hear. Honestly, I'm happy for you."

All his hard work paid off. It was worth all that time he'd spent learning those difficult words.

"Let me just say thanks—it was your idea, after all. I'd never have thought of it if you hadn't said anything."

"Not at all. You were the one who studied Terolish and risked your life on the open seas. I didn't do anything." All I'd done was share the first thought I had. Not many people could learn a radically different language from scratch.

"It helped me out, anyhow. I'll treat you to your drinks here, though it might not mean much if you're not touching alcohol."

After Harol had shared his stories and emptied two tankards of beer, the topic turned to my recent doings.

"Has anything new happened with you?" Harol asked.

"A few things. I had some ideas and decided to do some trading myself."

"You? Why?"

He sounded surprised. Probably because the sons of high-ranking nobles weren't known for being merchants.

“I don’t mean to brag, but I’ve got most of the credits I need already. If I don’t do *something*, I’ll just be bored every afternoon until I graduate. I figured I’d start up a business I can operate in the capital.”

“You know starting up a business in Sibiak isn’t easy, right?” Harol looked serious, like he had a lot to say on this subject.

“I’m well aware of that. It’s why I came up with a totally new product. Actually, you’ve seen it already.”

“Oh, so *that’s* what that was.”

“I’ve been making it myself. Well, just prototypes so far.”

What he’d seen was Prototype No. 10 of my new paper.

“But why put work into making something new when it’ll just get copied?”

Everyone kept saying the same thing: make something new, and the witches will steal it. Every merchant in the capital seemed to have a story of it happening.

“I did some groundwork first to prevent that. Only I can sell it.”

“You got exclusive marketing rights?”

“No, not quite. It’s called a patent. The gist of it is...” I gave him a simplified explanation.

“Sounds like you got a good deal there.”

“I did. The system’s public now and there are five registered patents already. Patent No. 1 is my patent on paper.”

“You’re making it already?”

“Of course. I’ve rented a hut in the capital close to the mountainside, and we’re steadily working on it.”

“Wow. You’ve gotta take me there sometime,” Harol said.

“I was about to head there today, actually.”

“Well, how about I come along?”

With no notice? I suppose that’s fine.

“All right. Let’s head to the Ho residence. It’s not far from here.”

“Ho residence? S-Sure.”

Harol looked a little bit daunted. I would’ve expected my house to be nothing to him after sailing to a nation of pirates and back.

It only took us ten minutes to reach the residence from the tavern. I was recognized at the front gate and passed through, no problem. I went to the stables and asked for a plainrunner.

“Wait. I’ve never ridden a bird in my life,” Harol blurted out.

“We’ve got saddles for two. Don’t worry.”

Since plainrunners didn’t have long, flat backs like horses, it could be a little cramped for two men when riding one.

“It’s not the saddle I’m worried about.” Harol still seemed nervous.

What happened to all of that courage you had when attending a foreign nation’s parliament?

I gave a slight tug on the reins in my hands. Just as signaled, the plainrunner obediently crouched down before us.

“It’ll be a good experience. They’re more comfortable to ride than horses. Please get on in the back first.”

“Ugh... All right.”

Harol reluctantly slipped his foot into the stirrup to climb up. He looked unsteady once he was up on the saddle.

I simply jumped onto the plainrunner, landing in the gap formed between Harol’s legs.

When I pulled on the reins once more, the plainrunner understood the signal to stand up.

Ho plainrunners had been trained much more thoroughly since Rook became head of family. Rook was never going to turn a blind eye if someone wasn’t training our birds well enough.

“Let’s go. By the way, make sure you don’t bite your tongue,” I warned.

I hit the plainrunner's abdomen with my feet to make it run.

This was a large, middle-aged bird rather than a youngster, so it had no trouble carrying two people.



"Here we are," I said.

I got down from the plainrunner in one agile movement.

"Uh..." Harol mumbled as he clumsily climbed off its back. The new experience seemed to have taken him by surprise, but he didn't complain about his butt being sore.

We'd arrived at an old building on the western edge of Sibiak.

There were several reasons why I'd chosen this building. The first was that it was run-down and cheap. The second was that it still had a water mill with a waterwheel that was used to draw water for the animals back when it housed livestock. And third, its location—it was upstream, which meant that the water here was clear and free from pollution.

It was filthy inside, with a floor made entirely of dirt, but it was good enough for our work.

I opened the door and went in.

"Hey, Yuri. The latest one came out pretty good," Caph greeted me cheerfully as he paused his work. He sounded confident in Prototype No. 11.

"That can't be Caph, can it?" Harol said.

"Hm?" All the merriment was gone from Caph's face the moment he looked at Harol. "Harol Harrell. What're you doing here?"

"What about you? How can you dare show your face around here?" Harol shot back.

"Your mother never teach you not to answer questions with questions? I asked first."

"Alenfest Trading sent their clerk here to spy, did they? What's the big idea?"

"I left Alenfest way back. What year are you living in?"

It felt like there was going to be trouble.

“Are you two old friends?” I asked.

“He’s no friend of mine,” Harol replied.

“We’re old business rivals,” Caph explained.

Ah, that makes sense.

“Try to get along with him,” I told Harol. “Caph’s an important business partner.”

“Get along with him? He does nothing but dirty work. Do you know how many times our business was in trouble because of him?”

“I was just following orders. Quit whining about the past, would you? Grow some balls while you’re at it,” Caph said.

“‘Grow some balls,’ huh? Will you still say that after I punch you out again?” Harol began rolling up his sleeves.

“Again”? He’s punched Caph once before?

Caph put his hand to his brow as if he found Harol’s attitude tiresome. “You’re going to start a fight even though we both know you’ll be crying later? Haven’t changed much, have you? You sailors never learn.”

What’s wrong with these two? They’re grown men, but they’re arguing like kids.

“Bastard!”

In his anger, Harol pushed me aside and reached for Caph’s collar.

I stopped Harol with a hard kick to the leg. I made sure to grab the back of his clothes before he could fall to the ground, but his knee still touched the dirt floor.

“Sorry Harol, but I’m not going to let you fight here.”

If they wanted to trade blows over whatever had happened between them in the past, that was fine by me...just not in this particular room. We had paper drying under rocks, along with papermaking molds and other things. The molds in particular were expensive pieces of equipment that would probably break if

an adult fell on one. It would cause a major setback to our work.

“Out of my way,” Harol snarled.

“Just a minute ago you wanted to learn the teachings of Yeesus. What’ll Ms. Ether think? First you sling insults around, now you’re about to use your fists.”

“Grr.”

As expected, the mention of Ms. Ether had an effect on Harol. He went quiet and got to his feet.

“Hah,” Caph laughed.

“You too, Caph. Remember where you are before you start a fight. What if you’d broken our tools?”

“True enough. It’d be a setback if we broke anything in here. Sorry.”

“What’s this?” Harol laughed. “You take orders from kids now? That’s funny.”

It felt a little weird to me too, but Caph himself had asked me to talk like I was his boss.

“Yuri’s my employer and I’m a manager for his company. I know you’re a sailor, but how’d you miss that?”

“What’d you say, asshole?”

“Stop it, both of you,” I said.

Or at least take it outside.

“Now, where’s Prototype No. 11?” I asked.

“Ah, it’s this one.” Caph handed me a piece of paper.

“Wow.”

It looked a little brown because it hadn’t been bleached. It bothered me a little because I knew that plain white paper was the best kind, but at least the color wasn’t too dirty-looking—the raw materials were close to white to start with, so it was only slightly off-color. Then again, parchment wasn’t pure white either, so this wouldn’t put our product at a disadvantage.

Despite that minor imperfection, Prototype No. 11 actually looked like paper.

The surface was flat with very few raised fibers.

A writer's pen would catch on any raised fibers, so getting rid of those was crucial. If the pen caught on the surface, it wouldn't just make it difficult to write—it could also tear the paper. At a bare minimum, I wanted an ordinary person with a standard pen to be able to pack the surface full of text. I was hoping that no tearing would occur at least nine times out of ten. Thicker paper would've been more robust, but that had obvious drawbacks, so our focus was on improving the surface.

"It's beautifully made. You did well."

"I was pretty proud of this one myself." Caph looked pleased with the quality of his work.

"This'll sell. This is our Product No. 1," I said.

"I can start selling this to stationery stores."

"Please do."

We'd already decided on our path forward after discussions. We were going to get started by selling our paper as an alternative to scrap pieces of parchment.

Parchment scraps were sold primarily for the purpose of taking notes. They were uneven pieces with odd shapes. Since they were made from animal hides, there were always going to be pieces from places like the paws or rumps that couldn't be made into neat rectangles. Those bits were usually cut away so that the rest of the hide was easier to work with.

Although the skins were generally stretched so that they wouldn't contract while drying, even pin-sized holes caused during the tanning process would grow much larger as they dried, resulting in more unusable pieces. Those were normally cut away too.

The result was that a lot of scraps of all shapes and sizes were cut away in the process of making parchment. But even though these failures weren't half as valuable as nice square pieces, they were still sold for a pretty penny as parchment regardless.

Myalo, for example, bought scraps in bulk, cut them into rough square shapes, and made a hole in each piece so that they could be bound together into a vocabulary book. He used it in the hopes that it might help him improve his Terolish. Unfortunately, these warped scrap pieces couldn't be used for long letters because they were too awkward to write on.

If we could offer nice, square pieces of paper as an alternative, they were bound to sell well. Our plant-based paper still didn't have the quality of parchment, so this was just a first step. We planned to come up with a product good enough to replace parchment completely later.

"How much of it can we make?" I asked. A high-quality product wouldn't mean much if the raw materials were too expensive, or if they couldn't be bought in large quantities.

"I didn't use any rare materials to make it, I improved the drying process. I thought maybe we're getting raised fibers because the paper's in contact with the rough wooden planks while contracting. So I took a good piece of wood, shaved it with a freshly sharpened plane, and then applied wax to seal it against water."

"Good thinking."

"No, it's nothing." Caph looked happy despite disagreeing.

"We won't have to set the price of these much lower than parchment scraps. Something as good as this should be much easier to write on."

There was no need to sell our product cheaply when it functioned better than the competition. You could never have too much money, after all.

"I thought so too. How about seventy percent the price of an equivalent size scrap?" Caph suggested.

Considering how cheap the materials were, seventy percent felt like a highway robbery. But if people wouldn't complain about being ripped off, then why not? It was hard to produce in bulk with just the two of us, so we had to squeeze every penny out of what we had.

"Let's do that. We'll use the money we make to get more staff and equipment."

“Finding people is easy enough...but what about the equipment?” Caph asked.

“I asked her to make us one more last time I saw her. With some improvements.”

Since I’d paid Lilly a little extra for her good work on the first papermaking mold, she’d happily accepted another request. I paid 1,500 ruga per screen. Lilly must’ve been paying for her own living costs, because she was always happy to take on more work.

“All right. Well, I can get people whenever we need them,” Caph assured me.

“Next thing is the suppliers for our materials. When they see us selling goods at a high price, they might raise their prices on us. Buy as much as you can right now. I want a good stockpile,” I said.

“That’s a good point.”

The bottlenecks at our production facility could always be fixed by investing more money into it, but there’d be no easy solution if our supply of materials dried up. At the moment, we were gathering them from weavers and drapers, but those sources could only supply us with so much. For a single papermaker, there’d never be any need to worry about running out. But once we had two or three employees making paper, supply would start to lag behind demand. Sooner or later, we’d have to find a way to make paper from lumber.

“You guys... You’ve got a serious operation going on here.” Harol was still shocked.

“Of course. We’re planning to take over the world.” Caph had gone from being a drunkard to an ambitious businessman.

“The world? Come on now...” Harol said.

“I’m serious. At the very least, we’re going to put the whole parchment guild out of business,” Caph replied.

Taking over the world sounded like an evil plot, but I supposed taking over the world of business was the same thing, in a sense.

“We’re not going to stop with just paper either,” I added.

“Oh?”

“Huh?”

Both of them were taken by surprise.

“We’ll start our next venture as soon as we’ve got the paper business going. Paper was just the quickest way I knew to start making profit. I haven’t applied for the patent on my next piece of technology yet, so I can’t explain it while you’re here, Harol.”

“What do you mean? Are you serious?” Caph asked.

“Of course I’m serious. Did you really think we’d stop as soon as we made paper?”

“Well, yeah.” That really did seem to have been Caph’s plan.

“I won’t graduate for another five years. I’ve got another two similar projects to work on once paper’s selling.”

Now that we had a prototype that was good enough for the market, it looked like our paper business would be going steady within two years’ time. That would put me back to sitting on my ass for most of the next five years.

That wouldn’t be so bad, but now that I’d started a business, I wanted to see how far I could take it.

“If you’re happy just being the head of the papermaking department, then I won’t stop you from keeping your focus there in the future.”

If that was Caph’s wish, I’d need to find someone new to help me. But he was talented, and I knew what sort of person he was, so I was hoping I could let him continue to run the company.

“No, if you’re going to take things further, I want to be there with you. Assuming I’m cut out for the task, that is.”

Caph’s eyes were full of determination. I knew he’d never go back to being a drunkard now. He was someone I could rely on.

Chapter 4 — Publishing

I

I was with Lilly at the usual teahouse. As always, we were wearing casual clothes so we could meet in secret.

“Lilly, thank you for the fourth mold.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Her fourth papermaking mold had arrived at the workshop three days earlier. The new workers Caph had hired were probably busy making paper with it as we spoke.

“I’m surprised you managed to make the screen finer.”

“Well, I do have more tools now. Got myself a gimlet for making little holes.”

The special-purpose tools she’d bought were clearly effective.

“And I made the frame thinner. It was too thick before,” she added.

“Sounds like you went to a lot of trouble.”

“It’s nothin’. The tool already paid for itself because I’ve gotten a whole six thousand ruga out of this.”

Six thousand ruga certainly *was* a good sum of money. It was more than our total revenue so far. I’d never studied business administration, but I worried that I might’ve used too much on capital investment.

“What are we here to talk about? Another order?”

Ah, down to business.

“I had a little idea and I wanted to run it by a Cultural Academy student.”

“Oh? And you can’t ask Sham or Her Highness?”

“I’d rather not. I’m pretty sure it’d upset Carol.”

“Don’t tell me it’s about that *book*?” Lilly asked.

Huh...? How’d she know?

“Well, there’s a face I’ve never seen you make. Did I surprise you?” she added.

Yeah, you did.

“Good guess. I’m impressed.”

“Well, I ain’t stupid.”

“Did you get to read it?” I asked.

“I did.”

We were talking about a book that was popular in the Cultural Academy. They had a tradition there of publishing their own books, which were then read by their peers.

Paper could be sold in its raw form at high volumes for a low price. Alternatively, it could be made into a book and sold for double its original value.

Now that my paper was in circulation, someone would try to make a book with it sooner or later. I didn’t have to leave that opportunity for other people.

The question was what sort of book I should publish.

If I made them from plant-based paper, they’d be expensive despite the cheap materials. Plus, I could only ever sell to those who were wealthy, literate, and very fond of books.

With those criteria in mind, the girls of the Cultural Academy were perfect. They were both rich and able to read. If I could publish a book that they were particularly interested in, it wouldn’t be hard to convince them to part with their cash. In fact, they might even buy every copy.

That was the plan, anyway. The only problem was figuring out what sort of books they liked. I didn’t have the slightest idea.

“Do you like books like that, Lilly?”

“Uh... Yuri, that’s no question to ask a young lady outright.” She looked offended.

Isn't it?

Given that the dorm was called White Birch Dormitory, I'd assumed the literature that circulated there was the kind of high-brow stuff that Japan's White Birch Society had once produced, or maybe the sort of thing high school literature clubs made. Now I had to wonder whether I'd been mistaken.

"All right, I'll fess up. I read that stuff sometimes..." Lilly sounded guilty for some reason. Or maybe just embarrassed.

"How do people like to read them?" I asked.

"How...?"

"The content isn't important as long as there's demand for it, but I need to know what the books look like, who writes them, and how they get passed around the dorm. Could you explain those things to me?"

"Oh, that's what you meant. Well, there ain't any rule against tellin' you, so I'll explain it. But you didn't hear this from me. Promise?"

"Of course. I promise."

Why would it cause trouble if people knew she'd told me?

"There've been these students in every generation of the Cultural Academy—we call them authors," Lilly began.

Authors? Well obviously, someone has to write the books.

"Authors are the ones who've read books from older generations and found it wakes up somethin' inside them. They start itchin' to write more. When an author wants to write, they just pick up a pen and get to writin'. It's made into a book after they finish."

Now I knew that they weren't buying blank books and writing in them from time to time the way I did. More likely, they wrote on pieces of parchment, then bound them together.

I knew from writing my own notes and journals that books with thick parchment weren't well-suited for writing novels. Whenever such a book was opened, both pages tended to curve like a gull's wings. Any text written directly on them would be uneven and hard to read.

Journals were generally written to be read by the writer only, so they didn't need to be neat. However, more care needed to be taken for something that had been prepared for an audience.

"Once the book's made, they let their friends read it. The friends give it back when they're done. Lending someone a book you've borrowed is a big no-no—it'd be too easy to lose track of them."

Apparently, they used a book rental system. There was no mass publication.

"But then how do people manage the older books? I'm also wondering how these writers handle the hefty cost of all the parchment."

"Yeah, I'm getting to that."

"Oh, okay."

Curiosity was making me get ahead of myself.

"White Birch Dormitory has a place called the Culture Room."

The Culture Room. It sounds fitting, but also a little creepy somehow. Why am I getting this mental image of it as a lukewarm heart full of crimson blood somewhere deep within the dorm?

"No one besides the dorm's residents can enter the Culture Room. Residents even clean it themselves since cleaning staff can't go in. It's like a secret room that holds all the books by generations of authors. It's as big as this teahouse, and packed with full shelves."

That must've been pretty big based on the description. I tried to picture it—a room full of nothing but shelves filled with books and only enough space between them for girls to pass through. Such a place could contain more than a thousand books, or even over ten thousand.

"All the books—new and old—are in there together," Lilly said.

"Sounds like a mini library."

"Anyone who takes one out of the dorm will get themselves in big trouble."

The rule says they're too precious to take out? I guess that makes sense. But doesn't that make things awkward?

“The curator of the Culture Room also holds the title of Dorm Chief.”

“Wow.”

“If the curator thinks a book’s good enough, they’ll buy it with the dorm’s budget and store it in the room.”

Huh? They spend the dorm’s budget on things like that?

“They pay more than the paper and ink cost. So long as the author writes something good, the curator makes it worth their while.”

“So no one can take a book to a scribe and get their own copy made?” I asked.

“As a rule, no. We can take them out of the dorm if we get special permission from the Dorm Chief, but showin’ books to scribes is taboo because, obviously, they’ll read them while transcribin’.”

“But students can’t go back to the dorm after they graduate. Don’t people want their own personal copies of books that were important to them?” I asked.

I could see such titles holding sentimental value to students. If I was in that situation and I had the money, I’d definitely want to own my own copy.

It might not be impossible for a graduate to go back to the dorm to read the book again, but that’d be like an adult going to visit the elementary school library. Someone with their own copy would actually be able to relax while reading it.

“In that case, they’ll either transcribe it themselves, or—if they’re another girl’s patron—they’ll get them to do it.”

Wow...

Copying an entire book took an incredible amount of work. I could picture a commoner doing it, but not noble girls.

“It sounds like they won’t want to buy any books from me.”

“I think they will,” Lilly replied between sips of her tea. “They say there’s an author who’s awful talented in our generation. Five authors’ve had their names

go down in White Birch Dormitory history so far. Now we might get a sixth.”

Oh?

“So you think something by that author will be good enough to sell?”

I didn’t really understand why the exceptional talent of this author mattered so much.

“Think about it. There’s over five hundred girls in White Birch Dormitory, right? Then an author releases a new work that gets passed around. Sure, it works, but there ain’t many more than three hundred and sixty days in a year.”

Ah, I see. That’s an obvious problem now I think about it.

“Not every girl is interested in this stuff, of course, but even if everyone who borrowed a book made sure to read the whole thing in a day, it’d still take more than a year for everyone to get a turn. This generation’s authors are prolific; they’re puttin’ out two or three new works every year. Some people wanna read every last one, but they can’t.”

They can’t mass-produce the books despite the demand. That’s a tough problem.

It was like someone waiting over a year to read the new bestseller. Any avid reader would be tearing their hair out with impatience. And those who were lucky enough to borrow it early might want to check it out again if it was a good book, but they’d have little hope of that.

To make matters worse, graduation was like a final deadline. It must’ve been a painful wait for anyone close to graduating. The opportunity might pass them by forever if they were unlucky.

“So if I were to put out a book and sell it...”

“You’re sure to find a lot of buyers if it’s half the price of a parchment book.”

“No, I mean, won’t it break the White Birch Dormitory’s rules?”

No matter how badly people like the witches wished otherwise, an open market was influenced by the principles of competition. We could ignore their rules to some extent because we had a cheaper, superior product. The rules would naturally evolve with time. If everyone with vested interests tried to

keep the rules constant, it would only stop them from making progress. But this book would be sold to the White Birch Dormitory in what had been a closed market until now. No one would buy it unless it was consistent with their ways. I didn't have the ability to enter the dorm to negotiate a relaxation of the rules either.

"I wonder... Now there's a question I can't answer. What *really* matters is the whole thing's just a hobby. Authors ain't forced into anythin'. No one makes them put their books into the Culture Room. So basically... Oh, but..."

Lilly seemed to be having a hard time deciding. She folded her arms and put her hand to her chin, making it hard for me to ignore the way her breasts were pushed up.

"There'd be a problem?"

"I don't reckon there will be, but these rules ain't exactly written down anywhere. Sure, there're written rules about curfews and not bringing boys to the dorm, but that's... Thing is... It's like..."

Ah, I get it.

"You're saying that sometimes opinions differ, and some people will claim their own viewpoint is the rule?"

"Yeah, that's it," Lilly said while pointing her finger at me. "No matter how popular the book is, it's the author that decides whether it'll enter the Culture Room or not. But the thing is, almost everyone puts them in. I'll bet some people think it's a rule now."

"Well, if there's demand, I think we can overcome that. The need for a better system should drive people to a concession."

"Well, you may be right. The way people've been arguing over who gets to read first lately has been just plain silly," Lilly said with a frown.

She must've seen those problems firsthand.

"In any case, I think I should speak to the author directly. Is this popular author a friend of yours, Lilly?"

"No. But you can often find her in the Grand Library."

Ah, the Grand Library. That's a quiet place.

"I see. Then I'll pay it a visit. Do you know her name?"

"Pina Colata," Lilly replied.

II

The Grand Library occupied a section of the academy grounds, so many people considered it part of the academy's facilities. In reality, it was under completely different management.

Commoners could also enter the library, but they had to pay a deposit of five gold coins each time they entered the building. They'd get it back when they left, of course, but it'd be forfeit if they tore or otherwise damaged one of the library's books—and god help anyone who sneezed on a book and was unlucky enough to have a librarian see them do it. They would have to say goodbye to about half a million yen worth of money. And needless to say, the contents of their bags would be searched on the way out. It was necessary to have measures in place against theft and damage because all the library's books were written on expensive parchment.

Still, the fact that commoners were allowed to enter at all made the Grand Library exceptional. The deposit and security measures were complex, but there were no other fees to pay. A huge establishment that was open to the public and technically free was a service way ahead of its time.

In addition, the deposit system was only in place at the front entrance. The rear entrance was located on the academy grounds, and it generally allowed students to come and go freely as long as they were in uniform.

We could take books out too, but the rules were strict. We could only borrow them on the condition that we would never remove it from the academy grounds. The only other people who had this privilege were nobles, and they had to hand over a large amount of collateral before receiving the book. Rook had given them that fee many times for the sake of letting me read at home. I owed him my gratitude.

The Grand Library was a surprisingly large building. It contained tens of

thousands of books, and—since the world lacked computers or databases—no one could easily grasp what exactly was in there. Most of the library's books were actually within fireproof storehouses on the edge of the academy's woods, along with a variety of grasses that repelled insects.

There was a reason why the collection had gotten so unwieldy: most books hadn't originated from the Shiyalta Kingdom. In fact, less than twenty percent of them had been made here. Instead, they'd been gathered thanks to the efforts of countless people who wanted intellectual heritage to be preserved after the collapse of Shanti kingdoms.

I caught a faint whiff of leather upon entering the Grand Library. It was the smell of the hides used to bind the books.

Since the collection was so vast that it sprawled across several storerooms, the bookshelves that were in the library proper were densely packed. There were, however, spaces left for desks and chairs where people could read. The decision to include those had been based on the assumption that people generally wouldn't remove the books, which made the furniture an obvious necessity.

I walked over to one such area and, unsurprisingly, found it comprised of mostly Cultural Academy students. There was barely anyone from the Knight Academy.

Not to say that the Knight Academy students were idiots, but an intellectual mindset wasn't something held in high regard there. It was like the role set for the students at the Cultural Academy was completely different from the role set for us.

I was here in search of Pina Colata, but I'd only been given a vague description of her appearance. I had no way to know which of these girls was her. I didn't have an appointment with her, or any means of arranging one, so I couldn't even be sure she was here to begin with.

There's no way I'll find her today, I concluded. Suddenly, I noticed a strange person in the corner of the second floor.

A girl was writing feverishly on a piece of parchment. She was looking down, her bushy hair and bangs—which were in dire need of a cut—forming a curtain

that covered her face.

There were many students and adults in the Grand Library, but not many of them were writing. Few people came here to do that, since this was primarily a place for reading books. This was especially true when one considered the inherent danger of splashing things with ink that came with using a quill and an inkwell. Commoners couldn't even make it in if ink was found in their belongings. Even students rarely brought ink, because anyone who dirtied the books would get into big trouble. They might even be barred completely if they were a repeat offender.

But regardless, here was a girl writing with a quill. She didn't have any books next to her, so she wasn't doing anything reckless, but it was an unusual sight nonetheless.

Is that her? I wondered while casually passing by behind her.

For just a moment, I caught a glimpse of her writing. The Shanish language made use of its own quotation marks that enclosed speech by characters in a scene, and the parchment was littered with them. It looked like she was writing a novel. If she'd been working on a report or some kind of scholarly article, there would've been far less quotations. I could've been mistaken, but there was a high chance she was Pina Colata.

I didn't want to disturb her while she was concentrating so intently. Instead, I decided to take the seat opposite her. I made sure to make as little noise as possible as I sat down on the chair, then I closed my eyes as if I was taking a nap. I had several things to think about.

In my mind, I went over methods I might use to break down wood into fibers using boiling water. Soon, I began to fall asleep. Just as I was nodding off, my neck relaxed, and the shock of my head falling forward woke me up.

When I shook off my sleepiness and opened my eyes, Pina Colata (assuming it was her) had put down her pen and was looking at me. When our eyes met, the girl shivered with shock. She hurriedly gathered her stationery and stood up, about to rush off.

"Whoa, wait, wait, wait."

I reacted quickly enough to stop her. Perhaps I should've reached out and grabbed her wrist too, but I worried she would've screamed.

"Wha...? Wh-Wh-What is it? Are you m-mad at me?"

She acted like she was afraid of me.

Huh? Why would I be mad at a girl I've only just met?

"I'm not angry at all. I just want to talk."

"I d-d-don't want to."

What's up with her? Is she scared of boys? Nobody's ever told me that I look frightening.

I was on the verge of looking like a creep. Forcefully preventing her from leaving was just going to make me look worse. If she made enough noise right now, I'd pretty much be labeled as a violent, brutish pervert. There'd be no way I could redeem myself from that.

I could always come back later. It was an infinitely better choice than taking that risk.

Fine. I'll give up for today.

"Hey, you. What are you doing to her?"

I felt a tight grip on my shoulder. I turned to see a girl in a Cultural Academy uniform glaring fiercely at me.

"I wasn't doing anything. I just wanted to talk."

Why do I feel guilty now? I really wasn't doing anything...

I hadn't gawked, or just walked up and started talking to her. And I *definitely* hadn't gone under the desk to peek at her panties. All I'd done was close my eyes and almost fall asleep.

"Yeah? What do you need to talk to Pina about?"

So she really is Pina.

"Sorry, but who are you?"

"I'm the one asking the questions. What do you want with Pina?"

“I’m sorry. It’s just that I can’t answer unless I know who you are.”

The kingdom’s witches were money-hungry. When there was profit involved, I couldn’t just be loose-lipped around the Cultural Academy students. If I said too much, she might reply, “That sounds profitable. I want in.”

“Listen here...” she said, glaring at me.

I’d noticed how tall she was the moment she’d grabbed my shoulder. She was older than me—probably about Lilly’s age—so she probably thought I wasn’t showing her enough respect.

“Komimi...” Pina murmured.

“Do you know him, Pina?”

“That’s Yuri.”

“It is...?”

I looked at her once more and saw that the hostility had faded from her face once she’d heard my name.

What’s that about? And how come Pina Colata knows my name too?

“If you’re willing to hear me out, then how about we talk somewhere else? This place isn’t ideal.”

We weren’t being loud, but I didn’t feel good about having a conversation in the library.

“All right then...” Komimi said.

“Okay...” Pina agreed.

I didn’t think they’d accept my offer that easily. What’s going on here?



I left the Grand Library via the front entrance with the two girls.

“Is there a teahouse with private rooms somewhere around here?”

“Ginkgo Leaf is nearby,” Komimi suggested. “They should have rooms there, though I’m fairly sure they charge for those.”

Like most students who’d lived in White Birch Dormitory for a long time, she

was knowledgeable about the teahouses around the academy. The boys at the Knight Academy rarely visited them unless they had a girlfriend in tow, but the Cultural Academy girls would go to chat all year round.

“That’s no problem. I’ll pay,” I said.

“That’s the next head of the Ho family for you. I’m sure you’re rich.”

“I make my money by running my own business. It’s not my family’s.”

That made Komimi scowl for some reason.

Why’d that upset her...? She scares me.

We entered the teahouse and asked for a room. It cost us twenty ruga, which wasn’t particularly expensive—the high-class restaurant I’d visited during Sham’s admission to the academy had cost seven hundred ruga at the time, and that had been just for the seating. Mind you, the prices there varied with the seasons. Still, compared to that, this place was cheap...not that it made any sense to compare it to a fancy restaurant.

We’d gotten ourselves a relaxing room with furnishings that included a square table surrounded by chairs. Although it was a modest-sized space, it had a large window looking out on a small garden that made it feel more spacious.

I took a seat and told them, “Please order whatever you’d like. It’s my treat.” I tried to say it as smoothly as possible to put them at ease, but it seemed it did nothing to make Komimi drop her hostile attitude.

“What are you plotting?” she asked.

What’s that supposed to mean? I wish I could tell her to lay off the accusations. What’ve I done to make them so wary of me? Pina’s staying in her shell like a nervous turtle, meanwhile Komimi’s as prickly as a hedgehog... And why’s she even here? It’s Pina I want to talk to.

“Let’s leave the main topic for the moment,” I said.

“All right. But I’ll pay for my own food and drink.”

There’s really no need.

“You came here upon my request, so there’s no need to hold back.”

“Upon your request? What?”

Komimi must have found my choice of words incredibly odd, because her face appeared more surprised than wary now.

Why'd she react like that...? I genuinely couldn't tell what she was thinking. I feel like it's turning into a mind reading contest. But why are we in a contest at all?

There came a knock at the room's door.

“Come in,” I said.

It was a server. “Excuse me. Are you ready to order?”

“I'd like the original blend tea, please,” Komimi said.

“Milk tea, nut cake, roast pudding, and the six cookie assortment.”

“Pina,” Komimi said sharply to reprimand her.

“I don't mind. Please bring us those,” I said.

“Yes, sir,” the server replied.

Pina sure can eat a lot for someone her size. Did she miss lunch, or does moving that pen burn a lot of calories?

“And I'll have hot barley tea and a plate of sliced cheese, please,” I said.

“Understood. To confirm, you'd like one original blend tea, one milk tea...”
the server recited the entire order.

“That's right. That's everything.”

“It will be with you shortly.”

The server bowed to us, stepped out of the room, then bowed once more before closing the door. I got the impression that the staff here were carefully trained. A little less ceremony would've made for a more relaxing dining experience, but the polite treatment was welcome when negotiating a deal with a stranger.

Now, down to business.

“Um... Komimi, was it? Could I ask about your relationship to Pina?”

That's what I want to know first.

"I'm...Pina's roommate."

Ah... Well, that explains everything. She is to Pina what Lilly is to Sham.

"So you're basically acting as her manager? Are you overseeing her new book?"

Now it made perfect sense that Komimi came along with Pina.

"Th-That's right."

I knew it.

It was obvious that Pina Colata was an introvert with a lack of people skills. Based on what I'd heard from Lilly, she'd need a manager, otherwise their whole system wouldn't work. There'd be five hundred students vying for the chance to read her novel the moment it'd been made into a book. It was crucial to have someone keeping track of who the book was lent out to and who'd be borrowing it next. If Pina Colata couldn't handle that, the task would be left to Komimi.

"Very well then. I'd like to talk a little about the book."

Now I knew I needed Komimi to hear what I had to say. In fact, having her here would save me time in the long run.

But for some reason, Pina now looked scared. Even Komimi's face had stiffened up. After all I'd done to loosen them up, it felt like we'd just gone back to square one.

"What about it? If you've got a problem, just come out and say it," Komimi demanded.

Seriously, what's with these reactions? Pina's terrified, while Komimi's gone from being wary to outright hostile. Do these two act like this around all boys? No, they must've gotten the wrong idea about me somehow.

"I think there's a misunderstanding. I didn't come here to be angry."

"Huh...?"

"You too, Pina. I can see that you're worried that I'm about to get mad at you,

but, honestly, I have no idea what you expect me to be angry about.”

At times like this, the quickest solution to clearing a misunderstanding was to be honest and share my feelings.

“Y-You don’t...?” Pina said.

“Nope. I don’t have the slightest idea. This all has me wondering if the two of you have been secretly plotting to have me assassinated,” I joked.

The reaction was a strange, shrill laugh from Pina. “Huh hee hee.”

Huh hee hee? That didn’t even sound human.

I’d faced numerous perilous situations before now, but that laugh was enough that even I shivered.

“Then what do you want?” Komimi asked, sounding slightly less wary.

You’re not going to react to that laugh? You’re not going to tell her off like you did a moment ago? Okay... If Komimi thinks it’s fine, then...it’s fine, I guess.

“Let’s discuss that once our tea gets here. First, I’d like to know why you thought I’d be angry. Could you tell me the reason?”

“Well...” Komimi struggled to find the words. She seemed reluctant to answer at all.

“Yu...Yuri...y-you’re...in...” Pina’s voice was close to a whisper. I could barely hear her.

“Pina,” Komimi said sharply to stop her from continuing.

“It’s okay...” Pina reassured Komimi. “You’re in it, Yuri.”

“Huh...?”

Did I mishear that?

“You mean I’m mentioned in the story?” I asked.

“Y-Yes...” Pina replied.

“Ummm...? Why is that?”

It made no sense to me at all.

"It's...popular."

Huh? What is?

"What's popular?"

"Huh hee hee."

"‘Huh hee hee’ doesn't answer my question."

"Want to...read it?"

Read it?

"Read what?"

"What I wrote," Pina said as she held out ten or so loose sheets of parchment.

Komimi was beginning to look very nervous. "Pina, you can't..."

What is this? Where's this going? Am I a character? I can't keep up with it all.

"Komimi, Yuri's the main character. It's his right to see. We can't hide it."

She was probably offering me the book's manuscript, but now I felt reluctant to look at it. I'd been told boys were never meant to behold these things.

"Will you read it...?" Pina asked.

"Um..."

Well, if I'm planning on publishing this thing, I suppose I'd better read it while I've got the chance.



Youth's Quietus, Chapter 18

"Rough day, wasn't it, Myalo?"

Myalo had just finished showering with cold well water following a fierce training session at the Knight Academy. Yuri, however, hadn't needed to wash himself at all. The class they'd just had left him neither out of breath nor sweating, despite its intensity.

The cold water was still falling in drops from the firm skin of Myalo's alluring body.

“Don’t forget this,” Yuri said, as he offered a towel to his naked friend.

“Yuri... Please don’t stare.” Myalo’s face began to turn red.

Yuri continued to stare, even as Myalo tried to hide from his gaze.

“Heh,” Yuri said simply, as if to flatly reject that request.

“You’re embarrassing me. Won’t you stop?”

As Myalo’s cheeks turned a deeper shade of crimson, Yuri turned his back and began to dry his own wet body.

Meanwhile...

Dolla had remained behind at the dojo to continue his training.

The design of his wooden training spear made it heavier than those used by the others, and he wielded it with skill equal to that of any adult warrior. His spear was intense and powerful as it crossed with those of the other young knights in his year, although none could compare to him. His fellow knights weren’t even worth practicing against.

With training over, Dolla was left alone in the dojo with his own thoughts. *No one compares to him...*

The further Dolla advanced along the path of the warrior, the stronger that feeling grew.

He’s special... I’ve given him all I have to give, and still he surpasses me. There’s no other man like him...

Yuri had already left. Even when everyone else stayed behind to continue their training, Yuri never remained with them. And yet, no one came close to Yuri’s level of skill. His techniques developed far quicker than those of anyone else, and his spear moved as though a god dwelled within it. Even Dolla—a prodigy in his own right—could not compare.

Lately, Dolla had begun taking to his bed each night before Yuri could enter and lie down in that same room they shared. It was the only way he could sleep.

The very knowledge that Yuri slept defenseless beside him was enough to

drive away all drowsiness. Lately, he awoke each night in order to relieve himself, but instead of returning to sleep, he would stare at Yuri's sleeping face in the neighboring bed until dawn broke.

Returning to his bed would bring him no solace. Once he knew that Yuri lay sleeping beside him, drowsiness refused to come, and he'd remain awake.

One day, I'll best him. One day, I'll make him mine.

A dismal combination of love and hatred had made its way into Dolla's heart, but still he hadn't realized it.

"Damn. I lost again," Yuri said.

He was playing togi with Myalo to pass the time.

Dolla watched from a nearby chair. He was a skilled togi player himself, but not in comparison to these two—though it mattered little to him. A person's skill or lack thereof at the togi board had never held any sort of significance to him.

"Another game?"

Dolla couldn't help but hear their conversation as he savored his liqueur. He felt he could even hear the *clack, clack, clack* of their pieces against the board.

"What's wrong, Dolla?"

The voice of one of his cronies suddenly brought Dolla to his senses. This boy was a frivolous sort.

"Why don't we head into town and find ourselves some women?"

Dolla had no need for women. Though he wished to someday find the one who'd be his life companion, he had no need for anyone else in the meantime.

"I'll pass."

"That's Dolla for you—always straitlaced."

Dolla looked at the clock and saw that it had grown late. He would have to retire to bed soon. Otherwise, Yuri would turn in first, leaving Dolla unable to sleep.

Then Dolla realized something. It was Friday. Lately, Yuri didn't return to their room on Friday nights. By chance, or perhaps by fate, Dolla then heard the pair talking.

"It's Friday today," Myalo said.

"So it is..." Yuri replied.

"Dale and Finshé are both away again today. They're visiting their homes."

"I see."

Dale and Finshé were Myalo's roommates. The conversation left Dolla feeling uneasy as he went upstairs to retire to his room.

Moonlight was shining into Myalo's room.

"We needn't even light the lamp." There was passion in Yuri's voice as it resounded through the room.

"Indeed."

Yuri pushed Myalo down onto the bed.

"P-Please give me a moment. I'll undress first," Myalo said.

"I can't wait."

Yuri didn't stop.

"Ah..." Myalo's high-pitched voice was an enticing sound.

Yuri began to caress and undress Myalo's body there on the bed.

"W-Wait... Ah..."

Myalo—feeling sensitive to Yuri's touch—fought desperately to stifle a moan of pleasure.

It was then that the door slammed wide open and a third person stepped into the room filled with the scent of the young couple. It was Dolla.

"What do you think you're doing?" Dolla demanded.

"Get out, Dolla," Yuri said.

“How could you?!”

Dolla charged at the couple like a raging bull. As Myalo tried to cover up beneath the sheets, Dolla approached. A single slap across the face was enough to knock Myalo unconscious.

“What have you done?!” Yuri screamed at Dolla in rage as he caught Myalo’s limp body.

“I’m gonna... I’m gonna...!!!”

Not even Dolla himself knew what he was about to do.

He’d been unaware of the agonizing lust he carried, so now he had no idea how to deal with the dark and carnal urges that had just been unleashed from deep within. But his confusion couldn’t make him stop. All of the love and hatred that he’d kept deep inside now gushed forth, and it filled Dolla’s beating heart.

“Whoa. What’re you— Stop!”

Dolla was in a trance as he pinned Yuri down and tore off his



What the hell is this?

It was so beyond anything I could’ve imagined that I was at a loss for words.

“This filth isn’t...” I began. I’d lost all desire to talk to them politely at this point.

“Huh hee hee.”

What’s she so happy about? Is she some kind of demon spawn?

“What gives you the right to—”

“I told you not to let him read it,” Komimi interjected.

“It’s...fine.”

I can’t believe them.

“No, it’s not fine. How am I supposed to sleep tonight?”

How’d she come up with something so horrific? Gay Dolla by my bedside the

whole night, watching me sleep... And she made Dolla sound...intelligent. Her view of the world has to be warped beyond all reason. Their brains must be rotten.

“This says ‘Chapter 18.’ Are you telling me there’s seventeen more of these?”

“Yes,” Pina replied.

I shuddered. This chapter’s fairly lengthy already, and it’s not even finished. She wrote seventeen more of these? What drove her to do something like that?

At that point, Komimi stepped in. “Let’s make sure that there’s no misunderstanding. I want to make something clear: the students of White Birch Dormitory are rational people. We know that these stories are just that —*stories.*”

“You call this reasonable? Can you honestly say that with a straight face?!” I angrily replied.

“Alpha,” whispered Pina.

“Definitely alpha,” Komimi whispered back.

I was getting more annoyed.

“Twenty-year-old students like you might know it’s just fiction, but this’ll give the kids weird ideas.”

“No, that’s...” Komimi began to argue, but hesitated. She didn’t sound sure herself. “Perhaps it might, but the older students always educate the younger ones when strange rumors start spreading.”

You think that makes it okay?

“I knew he’d be angry,” Pina whispered.

“Grr...”

Endure it. Just endure it. Remember why you’re here, I told myself.

“Phew...”

Be cool. Keep your cool.

I assured myself that this was just a dumb story they’d put together, one that

didn't really have anything to do with me. It wasn't worth thinking about. This was nothing but the wild imaginings of a couple of scatterbrained girls. There was no reason for me to put a stop to it. I just had to let them get on with it while I found a way to make money.

That might've sounded like I was selling my pride, but the reality was that they weren't going to stop no matter what I said. I was going to be left traumatized by this whatever happened, so the best I could do was find a way to profit from the situation.

As I was trying to come to terms with it in my own head, there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," I took it upon myself to say.

The tea had arrived with great timing. It would help me calm down.

Once the tea and snacks were all laid out on the table, the server said, "Please take your time," and quickly left.

My order was in front of me—hot barley tea and sliced cheese—but for some reason I felt so ill that I'd completely lost my appetite.

"Thank you," Pina said before digging into her snacks.

She just does whatever the hell she likes, doesn't she?

"If you didn't come here to be mad at us over the story, then why did you?" Komimi asked.

"Whew... All right. I've calmed down."

It's out of my mind. Let's just talk business.

"I'm planning to publish a book, and I was thinking that your works might be the ideal type of content."

"A book...?"

Pina and Komimi looked at each other in surprise.

"This is what I'm manufacturing right now." I passed them the piece of plant-based paper I'd brought.

"Oh, it's Ho paper." Apparently, Komimi already knew about it.

“What’s that?” Pina asked her.

It seemed word traveled quickly. Ho paper was the name we’d been selling it under. Caph was the one who’d started calling it that, then it had caught on with the retailers.

“I want to make books with it. We should be able to sell them for about half the price of a parchment book. There’ll be demand for it, right?”

“No, you can’t,” Komimi said bluntly.

She’s not going to cooperate?

“What was your impression just now?” Komimi asked. “You thought we were creepy, right? That’s the reason behind everything we do.”

The reason behind everything?

“I won’t deny that I found it off-putting,” I admitted. “Would it be a problem if I were to mass-produce and distribute copies? Enough that they’d be in all sorts of different households?”

“That’s not the problem. A woman’s pride might be injured if someone found it in her house, but that would be the extent of it.”

Lilly had also told me that copies were sometimes made in the dorm. Presumably, there were already students who’d taken copies home and kept them after graduating.

“Pina only showed it to you because it’s based on you. She was driven by her feelings of remorse. You’re a special case.”

Pina feels bad?

Pina was currently gulping down her freshly poured tea and digging into her various snacks. If she felt even a scrap of remorse, she certainly wasn’t showing it.

“We hate it when our books leak to outsiders. It harms the White Birch Dormitory’s reputation. That’s why nobody ever visits scribes to get copies made. People who make copies of books read them in greater detail than anyone else, and there’s no way to make them keep quiet about it.”

Lilly had said something similar—that I couldn't use scribes to produce my books—but that wasn't a problem for me.

"I don't plan to show the books to scribes. I'm using a new technology that doesn't involve handwritten text."

"But...how can you make copies if no one's writing them?"

"I've already applied for the patent, so I don't mind telling you. I plan to use a piece of technology known as a mimeograph."

"What's that?"

"First, we use a special wax to make a sheet that won't absorb ink. Then we place the sheet on a metal plate and use a steel pen to carve holes into it in the shape of the letters. Once all the letters are in place, we apply ink on top using a roller or a brush. Since the ink will only pass through the places where there's a hole in the sheet, it can only leave marks where the holes are located. If we use the same sheet one hundred times, then letters written once with a steel pen can be used to create one hundred copies, so it's a hundred times more efficient. There's nothing stopping us from doing it inside White Birch Dormitory."

In reality, carving letters with a steel pen was actually a lot more labor intensive than writing with a quill pen, so it was naive to call it one hundred times more efficient.

"Hmmm... Does it work? If the ink doesn't pass through the holes, you'll get text that's so faint and blurry that no one can read it."

"I can't say for sure right now, but we're working on it."

"What? You don't even have the equipment set up yet?"

She was right. It wasn't finished.

"I can't just start making the equipment under the assumption that this negotiation is going to be successful. But I *do* have a backup plan. If Pina doesn't like this idea, I'll give up and pursue another approach."

"Another plan? What is it?"

"I can't go into detail, but there's another type of book in high demand. But if

we publish that, we'll print it with a totally different invention. Even if I had the mimeograph set up already, I wouldn't be able to start work on either of the books. So to use the mimeograph at all, I need a deal here."

"Why come to us first? Does this book look more profitable?"

"Basically, the other idea's going to cost more than ten times as much to develop as the mimeograph. That's why I want to start with this."

My other idea was to use letterpress printing, but that was poorly suited with the Shanish language.

Writing Shanish made use of a high number of complex characters, much like Japanese kanji. There were about a thousand characters used in everyday Shanish, and when it came to novels, even a slightly difficult book would make use of about two thousand three hundred different characters. Even if we had all the necessary parts set up, we'd have to make a thousand or more letterpress types just to get started.

Terolish, on the other hand, used a collection of just twenty-four characters. Even when modifier characters that sometimes appeared in written sentences were included in the count, there were only twenty-seven characters in use. In order words, we just needed twenty-seven different molds before we could mass-produce all the letterpress types we'd need for printing any Terolish book in the world.

I couldn't easily get into the business of using letterpress printing for Shanish books because of the absurdly high initial cost.

"Oh? You've really thought this through."

"Yes, I have."

"If the copying process is that easy, I could do it myself. I already make clean manuscripts for Pina anyway."

The manuscript I'd just seen was a messy thing full of crossed out words and uneven line spacing, so it made sense that Komimi was used to doing a similar sort of work already.

"All right. Now let's talk about bookbinding. We don't need a scribe, but we'll

still need someone to assemble the book,” I said.

A steel pen could make one sheet that would be used to make a hundred copies. That was fine, but it was only a fraction of the effort that went into making a book. Binding one hundred books was going to involve a lot of work, and Komimi couldn’t reasonably be expected to handle it between classes.

“As long as the book isn’t given to another company, I’m not worried about the binding,” Komimi said.

“You’re sure?”

Her compliance was surprising given how difficult she’d been just a moment ago.

“Scribes have to read the text, but no one has to read a book to bind it.”

That was another obstacle completely dealt with.

“Okay. I can get people who can’t read to handle that work.”

“That’s right.”

“But what happens normally? You must need professional bookbinders.”

Surely they don’t bind all their books together with string like in Japan’s Edo period.

“No, we don’t go to professionals. There’s a set of bookbinding equipment in White Birch Dormitory.”

Is she serious?

“I do Pina’s books myself. It’s surprisingly easy; it just takes a lot of time.”

“That’s amazing, actually.”

How much of their youth are they spending on books that’re basically porn? There must be better uses for that enthusiasm.

“There are specialist stores in the royal capital that sell bookbinding equipment. Go buy a set for yourself—it’s not that expensive.”

“There are? You’ll have to give me the address later.”

I had no idea it was so easy to get a hold of the equipment. I suppose I can

easily hire my own people to do it in that case.

“By the way, you’ll have to tell me what binding method you’re using. It’d be a shame if I made each sheet into one page and then you couldn’t actually make them into a book.”

“Oh? What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well, some bookbinding techniques use quires. You make pamphlet-like things by cutting the ends of folded sheets, then put those together and bind them. Each original sheet becomes eight times as many pages. In that case, a large sheet needs to be sectioned into eight pages before you transcribe the text onto them—sixteen pages if you count both sides. Some of them will be turned upside down in the folding process, so if you haven’t given that some thought, you’ll end up with some inverted pages when you’re done.”

Ah, I’ve heard of that. There’s a lot of weird things to think about now.

“I’m not sure how it’s going to work,” Komimi continued, “but you’ll need to decide based on the type of equipment you get and how big the original sheets of Ho paper are. If your printing process won’t work on sheets that are too big, or if Ho paper is too small in the first place, we might only be able to fold each sheet into four pages.”

“All right. I’ll make sure to think about it so that everything gets printed correctly.”

“Please do.”

“But first, let’s talk about publishing. You’re going to let me release your book, right?” I looked at Pina.

“Pina?” Komimi said.

“I don’t understand it all, but okay...” she replied.

How does she still not understand? Well, whatever.

“It’s decided then. Now let’s talk about royalties.”

“Royalties?” Pina replied.

“The share of the money that you receive when the book sells,” I told her.

“I get money?”

“Yes. You too, Komimi.”

“Me?”

“I’ll make and supply the ink and the mimeographs. Use them as much as you like. But I’ll need to pay you for the work too.”

“I don’t care about that. I was never getting paid in the first place.”

“I’d be fine with that if it wasn’t for the fact that I’ll be profiting from it. I’m doing this because I’ll be getting money each time we sell a copy. I can’t just let you both work for free at the same time. Maybe you’re both rich enough that you don’t have any need for more money, but I still have to pay you on principle.”

“All...right,” Pina agreed.

She seemed completely disinterested. I could only assume she was from a wealthy family.

“Normally, it’d be easiest to offer ten percent of the sale price. However, this is a bit of an experiment, so the cost of the book will probably be quite high. That’s why I’d prefer to offer a proportion of the profits calculated by subtracting the manufacturing costs from the sales revenue. By the way, the costs will include whatever we pay Komimi for her work.”

“Hmm. I don’t get what the difference is.” Komimi appeared to be struggling to follow. To someone who’d never experienced money troubles, it probably didn’t seem worthwhile to think about all these details.

“When I talk about selling the book, it’s really the story that we’re selling. The physical object—the book—is really just a medium or a container. Since Pina’s the one who came up with the story, she’s especially important. She should get a higher share of the profit than me.”

“I see... It sounds like I should be thinking in terms of morality. As long as Pina is being treated fairly, I won’t object.”

“I don’t get it, but...” Pina had been looking at us like she had no idea what we were talking about.

“Pina, all you need to do is write what you want to write. Leave the tricky stuff to me.”

“All right...”

All in all, it made life much easier for me when Pina agreed to accept money without understanding the reason, as opposed to her declaring, “My literature is no mere commodity, and I refuse to profit from it.”

“Would a fifteen percent share of the profit be reasonable?” I figured that about ten percent was an ordinary share in the world of Japanese publishing, but that was a proportion of a fixed price that covered book-printing expenses. Since I was subtracting printing costs separately, I had to offer them a little extra.

“I’m not sure, but it sounds fine,” Komimi said.

“We haven’t agreed on what you’ll be paid yet, Komimi, but we can discuss that later.”

“I really don’t care about that.” She was completely disinterested in profit. Her motivation for cooperating must’ve been simply to free herself from the huge burden of managing the book lending.

“One last question. Are you sure there won’t be objections when we start selling the book?” I asked.

“You waited until now to ask?”

“Well...it’s just that witches are everywhere. We’ve got to be careful.”

Whenever the witch (Mafia) families caught the scent of money, they came snooping around, looking for a way to claim the profits. And the White Birch Dormitory was the very place that gave birth to the witches, so they were bound to cause trouble of some sort.

“We might have some problems, yes. But I get a ton of complaints about book lending already anyway.” Komimi looked exhausted by the thought alone. “I’m the one who gets harassed by the people waiting for their turn each day, and I hate—*absolutely hate*—hunting down the idiots who don’t return the book on time. I feel like I’m a debt collector. I’m not saying you’re the answer to my

prayers, but if I'd known you had a way to make books in large numbers, I would've been the one coming to *you* for help."

Being Pina's manager must involve a lot of hard work and stress. And she's doing all this for Pina voluntarily too. Roommate or not, I'd have left Pina to handle her own problems if it were me. She must be a really big fan of the smu—uh, erotic stories that Pina's writing to go through all that trouble.

"And I doubt anyone will say anything if you're the one behind it all," Komimi added. "I know it's been more than twenty years now, but people haven't forgotten."

Twenty years since what?

"What do you mean?"

"Well, your father, of course."

"My father? What happened to my dad?"

Komimi looked like she wished she'd kept her mouth shut. "Oh. Forget I said anything."

"Well, now I'm curious," I said.

"Your father might've wanted to keep it a secret. I'm not saying anything."

So something really did happen with Rook.

"It's about him dropping out, isn't it? I heard that a Cultural Academy student fell for him and caused a scandal."

"I'm not sure how much I can say."

I really can't be bothered to play games.

"Tell me right now," I demanded while staring at her.

Komimi shuddered, as if the room had just gone very cold, and then looked away. "Whew... He really is an alpha," she said.

"I could make him a top instead of a bottom..." Pina said.

"What are you two talking about?" I got the feeling it was something less than pleasant.

"I'm really not sure I should tell you anything," Komimi said.

"Tell me. I'm not taking no for an answer."

For some reason, when I spoke to Komimi like that, it made her grin in a way that gave me the creeps.

"But I'm not sure I should tell you," she repeated.

She's getting a kick out of this, isn't she?

"That's all you're getting," I told her.

"Oh, come on. Don't be like that," she said.

She's wasting my time. I guess I'll leave.

"I'll tell you since there's no reason I shouldn't. But use your head before you go telling everyone," Komimi warned.

"As if I would."

"Your father, Lord Rook, was in a similar situation to you."

What situation? When he enrolled he was respected as the Ho family's second eldest son.

"By situation, I mean he was the subject of stories, the same way you are."

Oh... That's what she meant. What's wrong with these girls? I'm starting to wish the White Birch Dormitory would just get torn down. And to think I left Sham in a place like that.

"My dad's a handsome man. I see how it is." Back in those days, he was an athletic, good-looking boy from a respectable chieftain family. He hadn't exactly excelled in classes from what I'd heard, but he probably wasn't much worse than average. I could see why they'd use him as a character.

"I don't like talking about this, but there's something you need to know if you're going to understand what happened."

"Just get on with it."

"What do you think the most important rule is regarding our books?"

Hmm... That's a tough one.

“Don’t include royal family members? I noticed that Her Highness was completely missing from what I just read.”

Normally I would’ve just called her “Carol,” but it felt wise to say “Her Highness” in this case so that they wouldn’t get any weird ideas about my relationship with her. The story had mentioned that I was roommates with Dolla, so Carol should’ve at least been mentioned too.

“That’s... Well, that’s just obvious. We have enough common sense not to bring Her Highness into it.” Komimi sounded almost offended.

She’s not wrong. It’d be a major incident if someone started distributing novels about Carol doing lewd things.

“By the way, not every single book in the Cultural Academy is about two boys. Some authors write romance from personal experience too—in other words, relationships between men and women.”

“Well, stick to writing those then,” I demanded.

“They’re not popular, and they don’t turn out well.”

“All right, fine. Just tell me what the answer was.”

“The most important rule is that the author can’t write down any fantasies about herself and the boy she chose as the character.”

Ahh... I think I can see why.

“If it’s an unpopular boy—or someone totally fictional—then writing about their romantic relationships isn’t a real problem. Of course, the books that receive a lot of attention are usually about the most popular boys of the time.”

“Hold on a second.”

“Hm?”

“Then why’s Pina writing about me?”

“Because you’re super popular.”

Huh?

“Me? Popular? Besides Her Highness and my cousin, the girls from the Cultural Academy don’t even speak to me.” I deliberately neglected to mention

Lilly.

“There are two girls known as ‘Her Highness,’ aren’t there? What about Princess Carla?”

Ah... I totally forgot.

“I spoke to her once and the stupid rumors it sparked were nothing but trouble.”

“Ah. Yes, I thought she had to be exaggerating. It really gets your fans wound up whenever she starts bragging about you. Though if it were Princess Carol, I wouldn’t be so quick to dismiss anything I’d heard given her standing.”

“All right.”

I’m done caring about all that.

“Still, Princess Carla *is* beautiful, and she’s royalty. It wasn’t an implausible scenario. However, if your average girl were to write stories about you and her in some romantic situation, her friends would react quite negatively when they saw it.”

“But who would let their friends read something like that?”

“Sadly, the girl in this case was a talented writer. A lot of people read her stories.”

“Wait, what?”

“I’m talking about the girl who confessed her love to Lord Rook. The books she wrote are still stored in the Culture Room—people read them even now. Her works were great up until she started writing romances with herself as the main heroine. She actually wrote ten books about the Lord Rook with Lord Galla pairing alone.”

Rook and Galla...? I don’t even want to know.

“Are you telling me you’ve read all ten?”

“Why wouldn’t I? Pina read them too.”

Her response struck fear into me.

“I read them,” Pina said. “I like the one where they do it after getting drunk

and playing strip togi.”

“Oh, that’s right. She was the one who invented strip togi, wasn’t she?”
Komimi replied.

“I don’t wanna know.”

The hell is strip togi? I’ve never heard of that in my life.

“But then she fell completely in love with Lord Rook and confessed to him. After he rejected her, she started writing romance novels with him and her as main characters. People treated her differently after that.”

“You mean they bullied her? That’s horrible.”

“No, not bullied. This was a girl from a major witch family we’re talking about.”

“Ostracized then?”

“Well... I suppose you’d call it that.”

I felt sorry for her, but there was no denying that she’d brought it on herself. Students at the academy weren’t under an obligation to get along with each other. People were free to avoid those they didn’t like. Being ostracized was just a natural consequence of turning people against her.

“When she found it difficult to fit in at the dorm, she began to spend her days following Lord Rook around.”

Whoa... She went from writing gay erotica about him to full-on stalking?

I’d always imagined Rook as one of the lucky ones who’d experienced nothing but fun in his student days, but it seemed he’d had problems of his own. I had to sympathize.

“The students were a lot less inhibited in those days. Girls would follow their favorite boy around and spend their breaks watching the spear training sessions.”

“In those days”? Does that mean that they’re controlling themselves now?

I recalled that Rook had mentioned a need to be wary of Cultural Academy students who followed boys around, but I’d barely ever seen that happen.

There must've been some recently established rules that had put an end to it.

"Lord Rook had a good number of girls who'd follow him around, but none were as persistent as her. One day he snapped and yelled at her, telling her to stay away. When she couldn't bear to be in the dorm or around Lord Rook, she felt she had nowhere to go. She took her own life."

Suicide? She...killed herself?

"Oh... But that's just one of those things, isn't it? Not that I don't feel bad for her..."

It wasn't Rook's fault. I couldn't completely blame White Birch Dormitory either. I hated to accuse someone who'd been driven to suicide of putting themselves in that situation through their own actions, but it was hard to blame anyone else in the scenario. No one had placed her into that situation or forced her to commit suicide. Sadly, people couldn't read each other's minds, so no one could've known the feelings she was bottling up inside.

"It wasn't her suicide that caused the problem. It's rare for a girl from White Birch to take her own life over unrequited love, but she certainly wasn't the first."

Given that she'd been causing trouble for Rook and making her peers avoid her, you might've expected the problems to vanish once she was gone, as awful as that sounds. Rook—being the kind man he was—probably felt terrible over the whole thing, but not badly enough to quit the Knight Academy. He hadn't done anything egregious enough to be forced out either.

"The problem came later. Since she never left a suicide note, her family assumed she'd killed herself over what Lord Rook said. The girl's older brother challenged him to a duel."

"What?!" I couldn't hide my shock.

A duel?! Seriously?!

From what I'd heard, duels in our kingdom weren't just minor spats that ended with someone laying their weapon down—they continued until someone was completely unable to continue fighting.

“There was no need to take it out on my dad like that. He turned it down, right?”

A duel wouldn't just start the moment someone requested one. A formal invitation had to be extended and then accepted. Otherwise anyone who got mad over losing his girlfriend might murder her new boyfriend, then try to absolve himself by declaring that it was a duel. For the sake of law and order, such fights requested over something stupid could be declined.

“I don't know the specifics, but he accepted. The challenge came from a fairly powerful witch family.”

Sometimes I wonder how this kingdom hasn't fallen apart already.

“Lord Rook slew the girl's older brother in the duel, then left the academy shortly after.”

“Ah...”

So that's why my dad left.

Komimi seemed to think that Rook had dropped out because he felt responsible for the girl's death; in fact, I was sure that most people had the same impression. However, I knew Rook. It was more likely that killing her brother had made him realize that he was poorly suited for knighthood. It was better not to become a knight at all than a bad one.

Although many knights gave out orders rather than doing the fighting themselves, they were ultimately people who'd mastered lethal techniques. There'd be no real reason for someone to be a knight if they merely managed a territory. Knights were trained for war, not governance. Killing people wasn't just an occasional task for a knight—it was a key responsibility.

While most people would follow their family's ways without much thought, the realization had changed Rook's path in life. It had been a major turning point.

“Such an incident—where the boy chosen as a main character left the academy because of the story—had never happened before. Lord Rook was born to the Ho family, so people had expected great things from him. Although he didn't do very well in his lecture classes, his skill as a warrior was so

impressive that he might've been considered Lord Galla's equal as the greatest of his generation. There was a lot of debate over it in White Birch, leading to the self-imposed rules we follow today."

"The students felt responsible for making my dad quit the academy?"

"I think so, yes."

"Right... I get that, but why couldn't they appeal to the royal castle before the duel even happened? They could've explained that she committed suicide over being ostracized, not because of Rook."

The only reason Rook had accepted the duel was because he'd been made the scapegoat. The students of White Birch hadn't done anything. If they'd told the full story, Rook could've refused the challenge. Even if he'd already accepted it, it might've been called off.

"So in the end, that's why they feel responsible," I said. "Maybe it was too much trouble, or they were saving their reputations. Either way, no one bothered to speak up about how they'd treated the girl."

"I'm sure you're angry, but please remember that I wasn't there. I'm just telling you the story as it was passed on to me," Komimi said.

She was right—it had all happened decades ago. I'd been getting a little heated, but I quickly came to my senses. There was no sense in blaming the students of today.

"All right... Let's forget it. I doubt my dad still worries over all this. And if people still feel indebted to me, I'll just make the most of it."

"That's a reasonable attitude."

"So that's the whole story? Sorry for keeping you here so long."

"I don't mind at all. Please contact me once you've got all your equipment and made your preparations."

"I will...but how?"

Boys could be killed just for stepping foot near White Birch Dormitory.

"Why not just drop me a letter in the dorm's mailbox?"

Huh?

“Since when did that system exist?”

“What, you didn’t know? Put a letter in the mailbox addressed to room 362, and it’ll be delivered to our room.”

I had no idea that was possible. I’ll have to ask Sham for her room number later.

“Oh, but you obviously can’t mail it yourself, you’re too famous. Get someone else to do it.”

All right, sure.

“Will do. Pina, thanks again.”

“I’m...confused. But you’re welcome.”

III

After leaving the teahouse, I headed toward the Ho family residence. Rook had come all the way to the capital to see me.

I passed through the gate on foot and found a maid waiting to greet me outside the front entrance.

“Lord Rook has already arrived,” she said while taking my uniform’s blazer.

The maid then guided me into the parlor where Rook was sitting. He was busy reading over some documents with a puzzled look on his face.

It looked as though he’d gained some weight in the years since he’d stopped performing manual labor on a daily basis. I wondered whether he was going to ask me if he looked fat. I decided I’d tell him it made him look dignified, and I made sure to run a mental simulation of that exchange before greeting him.

“Father, I’ve returned,” I said while lowering my head.

“Welcome back. Been a while, hasn’t it?”

“I don’t think we’ve seen each other for a whole month. I’ve been as busy as you have.”

“That’s what I want to talk about,” he replied.

Just as I thought, Rook had found out about my business. I knew he wouldn’t call on me just to ask me whether he looked fat, after all.

“Sit down.”

“Yes, father.” I obediently took a seat at the table.

“I’ve heard you’ve been making yourself some extra money.” There was a hint of accusation in his voice.

I figured he’d ask about that.

“I’m not simply making extra money. But yes, it’s true.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It’s just... I didn’t want to bother you.”

I’d wanted to keep my family out of it if possible. Once they were involved, my business would start looking like a pastime for a rich noble’s kid. No one would want to deal with me in that case, and it would cease to be my own business. All of my employees, Caph included, would start to think that I wasn’t their true boss—they’d feel like employees of the Ho family. As soon as that happened, it’d be difficult to run things exactly how I wanted.

“Don’t I give you enough money?”

“More than enough. All I spend it on is journals.”

“Then why are you going out to earn more?”

“It’s not simply pocket money. It’s a small business now, but we’re doing important work. It’s teaching me a lot about society.”

“I’m not saying you shouldn’t learn about society, but what about your courses?”

“Please don’t worry about my courses, father. They’re progressing smoothly.” They couldn’t have been going any smoother, in fact.

“You’re only in your fifth year. That’s the busiest time for a student.”

“I’ve already acquired two hundred and fifty credits. I only need forty-two

more from practical classes, and eight from lecture courses.”

Rook looked astonished. “You can’t be serious.”

To put things in perspective, students in my year had about one hundred and thirty credits on average. The exceptional students had a hundred and fifty. Myalo, being a genius, had about two hundred credits. Two hundred and fifty put me way above everyone else.

“I’m serious. I only have afternoon lectures once per week. If I didn’t do something, I would’ve become like the lazy older students who’re out having fun every afternoon.”

Students with no afternoon lessons often spent their time partying. Even those who still had lectures to attend would sometimes give in to temptation and go wild like a college student on a gap year. Compared to them, my activities were actually very healthy.

“I might start using my time to have fun once I’m in my final year, but I’ve still got another five to go. All that free time is going to make me lose my mind.”

“Uh... I suppose so...”

“I hope I haven’t caused any trouble.”

“No... I wouldn’t call it trouble, but... No, it’s fine.”

“You’re sure?”

“If you’re attending classes and getting credits, then yes, it’s fine.”

I’d essentially gotten his approval.

Parental permission acquired. Nice work.

But it wasn’t that simple.

“It’s far from fine,” I said. *It’s not fine at all.*

“What do you mean?” Rook asked in surprise.

“Someone must have informed you about all this. Did they say I’m ruining my reputation by working for some extra money?”

Rook still looked a little taken aback, but there was no other explanation.

“How’d you know?”

“Well, you were just waiting here, ready to lecture me. I’d expect you to have some irrefutable evidence on hand so I can’t make excuses or deny it all. If word came to you from someone within the Ho family, then you should’ve come up with *something* while investigating, but you didn’t. That means word didn’t come to you from within the Ho family; it came from an outsider. Since I’m in the royal capital, I’m not just ninety percent sure it came from a witch—I’m one hundred percent sure. I’m no fool. I can guess at least *that* much.”

“I can never keep up with you, Yuri...” Rook muttered while scratching his head. The gesture made him look old and tired.

“I’ve been doing things quietly, so only a handful of people even know that I’ve got a side job. I made sure that we never use the Ho family name.”

I’d been very clear about that to Caph. If the business failed and I found myself being accused of incompetency, I’d live with that because it’d be my own fault. I wouldn’t allow my family name to be tarnished. That’s why I wasn’t using the weight of my surname to promote the sales of our products or to gain more respect for our company.

Although we did use the word “Ho,” it was synonymous with the southern territories of the kingdom because my family had ruled over them for so long. Products like Ho dye and Ho crockery were already well-known. When we called our product Ho paper, the name was simply taken to mean “paper from the kingdom’s south.”

“I had business at the royal castle recently. A member of a witch family casually mentioned it to me.”

“Ah...” It was just as I’d thought. Ho paper was so commonplace now that they were bound to have looked into it.

“But don’t worry, this is nothing new. You weren’t doing anything wrong, so I don’t care.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to cause trouble for our family.”

“Witches are always complaining about something. If I listened to every single one, I’d never get anything done.”

Always? Now I'm curious.

"What kind of things do they usually complain about?"

"I haven't seen it for myself, but I've heard you're friends with Princess Carol. They find roundabout ways to tell me that you and her shouldn't be quite so close."

"Yikes."

They must not like the idea of a chieftain family member getting too friendly with the royals. But I don't see what the big deal is—we're just a couple of kids who talk to each other.

"Don't worry about it," Rook reassured me. "I think it's actually a good thing that you're getting on well with Princess Carol."

"Oh, I won't. I spend a lot of time with Her Highness. We're on a first-name basis."

"First-name basis?" Rook looked a little suspicious.

"Because she's always saying things like 'get your act together, Yuri' and then hitting me across the head."

"And how do you react?"

"I reply with something like, 'You don't have to hit me over every little mistake, dumbass.' Naturally, I don't hit her back since she's royalty, and a girl too."

The look on Rook's face was impossible to describe. "You watch your tongue around her. Don't be so rude."

"I know, I know."

"Princess Carol will be the next queen of the kingdom."

Is that what he's worried about?

"So it's been decided now?" I asked.

"What has?"

"I mean, there's Princess Carla too."

The kingdom had no established order of precedence for heirs to the throne. The eldest daughter would generally be favored if both were equally capable, but nothing was certain.

“There’s no chance of Princess Carla being chosen from what I’ve heard. Not that I’d know. In the end, it’s up to Her Majesty to decide. I don’t pry into these kinds of things,” Rook said.

“When I met with Her Majesty, I got the impression that she dotes on Princess Carol.” Though she’d been strict with her, it looked like it was all motivated by love. I doubted that she treated Carla the exact same way.

“Oh, she does?” Rook replied.

“I think I’d be in trouble if Princess Carla was chosen as our next queen.”

“Why’s that?”

This was a good opportunity to warn him. “A few years ago, she tried pressuring me to date her. Since then she’s been telling everyone we’re together and that we’ll be married in the future. It’s nothing but trouble. Please don’t believe any of the rumors she starts.”

“She did *what*? I’ve never heard about this. What did you say to her when she first approached you?” As expected, he was taking this matter very seriously.

“I did as you’d advised—I told her I was grateful she felt that way, but I couldn’t possibly enter a relationship with her because my feelings weren’t pure... Or something like that.”

“So she made up all that talk about the two of you getting married?”

“Didn’t I just say that? She couldn’t even convince the other girls in White Birch Dormitory, so I don’t think anyone took her seriously.”

“Oh... Well, that’s fine then. Be wary of White Birch; evil lurks there.”

I was just thinking the same thing. I’d seen enough that day alone to draw the same conclusion.

“Yes, I think you’re right. Just today I was hearing about the trouble the girls gave you. It sounded like you had a rough time.”

“No kidding. You be careful.” Rook sounded nostalgic, like it was all far behind him.

“It’s too late. They’re already writing about me.”

Though it wasn’t as though I could’ve done anything to stop it happening, even if I’d seen it coming.

Rook grimaced as I said that, as if the topic disgusted him. He looked like someone who’d just taken a swig of vinegar after mistaking it for fine wine.

“It’s one of *those* books, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it’s probably what you’re imagining. They let me read part of one today.”

“You read one? But no one takes them out of the dorm. Did the rules change?”

“No, they still keep them in the dorm, but I got the chance to read a chapter. As you might guess, it wasn’t very pleasant.”

“I’ve never actually seen them myself.”

“Of course not. I was only allowed to read it by chance.”

“What exactly are those stories about?” Rook sounded curious.

“You’re better off not knowing. I don’t want to make you feel ill or lose sleep.”

“I see... But what... Okay, never mind.”

Rook looked a little disappointed. It was like someone resisting the urge to look at a train wreck. I thought it was for the best if I didn’t tell him that the stories about him were still stored in the Culture Room...and that there were numerous girls he’d never met still reading them to this day.

“I heard about the suicide that happened in your school days.”

“Ah. That...”

“And that it led to you fighting a duel.”

“Yes... You be careful how you turn girls down, Yuri. It’s always hard to guess

what might hurt a girl's feelings." I was no doubt bringing back unpleasant memories for him.

"I will. But from what I heard, your rejection wasn't the only thing that drove her to suicide."

"Oh? It wasn't?"

So he really didn't know.

"I heard that the girl who confessed to you was an author. The other girls at White Birch got upset over the things she'd written and began to make her feel unwelcome there. That's what led her to start stalking you in the first place."

"Really? You mean she was being bullied in the dorm?"

"Yes, I think that was the reality of it."

"I had no idea..."

"I don't think there's anyone in particular to blame, but it's sad."

Rook couldn't have found much consolation in this information.

"Yes... But I did a horrible thing. If someone had told me... No, I was still young. I wouldn't have known how to..." Rook fell quiet for a while. He couldn't seem to find the words.

"Maybe I'll visit her grave," he said quietly before summoning his butler and telling him to search for the girl's resting place.



"Yuri! Welcome home!"

Suzuya threw open the door and came running in to give me a big hug.

"Sorry for not writing, mom," I said in her arms.

"Don't worry about that. You've been working hard, haven't you?"

"Yes, I'm working hard."

Suzuya held me. She smelled good as always. Somehow, it made me relax.

She was oddly energetic today. Even after she finally let go, Suzuya stayed close to me, her two hands resting on my shoulders.

“You’ll be staying the night, won’t you?”

“Of course.”

“Thank goodness.”

What mattered most was that she was happy.



It had been five years since various events had led us to make use of this residence. Although I generally slept in the dorm, I'd come to know the faces of the various people who worked in the building. Most of them were people whose families had served us for generations, and there hadn't been many changes in personnel in the five years since I'd arrived.

The guards, however, were another story. Serving as a guard for one's whole life wasn't much of a career, so many came from our territory and were temporarily assigned a post. Entertainment in the royal capital was much more varied—not to mention higher quality—than in the countryside, so some of our soldiers were given the chance to take it easy as a sort of reward.

With all that said, however, I was greeted by an unfamiliar face when I took my seat at the dinner table. A girl in a maid outfit bowed to me.

"It's an honor to meet you, Lord Yuri," she said.

"Likewise. Nice to meet you."

She was a little younger than me. Naturally, I assumed she was a new staff member.

"She's your cousin," Rook informed me.

"Oho ho," the girl laughed.

That came as a surprise. I'd thought Sham was my only cousin. Then again, Gok could've easily had illegitimate children I didn't know about.

"Is she one of Uncle Gok's children?" I asked. "It's a good thing Aunt Satsuki didn't find out while he was still alive."

In a way, you could say it was a close call.

"Don't be stupid," Rook snapped.

"She's my niece," Suzuya explained.

That made more sense. She was from my mom's side of the family.

I'd never visited them, but I knew they lived somewhere remote. Despite that, my cousin, who was visiting us from the countryside, didn't have a rustic air about her. Perhaps it had something to do with her pretty face, or her well-kept

hair. Overall, she looked sophisticated. It was likely she'd been tidied up a little before she started working here.

"Are you here to work as a maid?" I asked.

"Yes. I've been in the family's care since last week," she answered politely.

Did she come here to make money? I wondered.

Suzuya's family worked as farmers back when Rook was a ranch owner, but I had no idea whether that was still the case. Things might've all changed since Rook became head of the family.

"She's just working for us temporarily," Rook added.

Having a family member for a maid was a weird feeling. I'd never expect a cousin to address me as "Lord." I was used to having all the regular maids call me that, but when a close relative acted like there was a huge gap in social standing between us, it just didn't feel right.

"Can I ask your name?"

"It's Beaule Emanon."

Emanon? That's Suzuya's maiden name, isn't it?

"Miss Emanon," I repeated.

"Please, call me Beaule."

Uhh... Her first name...

Referring to her by her first name while she called me "Lord Yuri" felt even more awkward. It was like I was a noble talking down to a commoner. To me, cousins counted as close family.

I looked over at Rook, hoping he'd offer me some help.

"I'm still thinking things over," he said.

"I see..."

Clearly Rook wasn't comfortable with the situation either.

If Rook had insisted on marrying Suzuya when he was already head of the Ho family, it would've given the Emanon family a considerable boost in status.

Beaule would've entered the Cultural Academy at the age of ten, just like Sham. However, at the time of their marriage, most people had viewed Rook as a good-for-nothing who'd chosen to rock and roll out of the prestigious Knight Academy course...or so I assumed. Back then, no one had expected the Emanon household to be made part of the Ho family.

It was possible they could be given support now that Rook was head of family, but that didn't explain why they'd send us one of their children. I had to wonder whether Suzuya's older brother thought this would somehow give the family's status a boost.

"Judging by your outfit, you're on duty today," I said.

"That's right," she replied.

As a relative of ours, it would've made sense for her to sit at the table and eat with us. Her and Suzuya were aunt and niece after all.

"I'm grateful to have you in our service," I told her.

"I'm grateful to be here and plan to work to the hardest of my ability."

After we'd finished eating, I was summoned to the study.

"Yuri, what did you make of the girl?" Rook asked.

"She seemed like a good kid, though it's hard to know how I should talk to her," I said from an armchair as I drank the tea we'd been served.

"She's the second child of Suzuya's older brother."

"Oh, okay."

"Never mind, 'oh, okay.' It'll be your job to worry about how you treat our relatives someday, you know."

"I realize that, but I'm not sure what else I can say. It all depends on what mom's family had in mind when they sent her here."

If it was motivated by ambition, we'd have to do something for them.

No one would've cared about their aspirations back when Rook was just a rancher, but now that he was head of a powerful family, it wouldn't hurt to do something to improve their situation.

Still, offering help to them was complicated by the importance that knight families put on knighthood. Gaining such a title was similar to graduating from officer's school in the military, so anyone given a military role without that qualification was limited in terms of how high their rank could be. It was similar to the difference in treatment between commissioned and noncommissioned officers.

It would've been much easier to simply make her family nobles, but chieftain family rules said that nobles who refused to depart for the battlefield had to pay large tributes to the family they served under. This rule had applied to Rook himself in the past, but his tribute hadn't been too hefty because his territory wasn't very large—it was merely his own home plus a mountainous region by the ranch. Paying the fee had been easy thanks to the large amount of money the ranch brought in.

The Emanon family could simply keep a small piece of land limited to the area surrounding their home, like Rook had, but—unlike my father—they were farmers with only a small amount of income. However small their fee might've been, it would still contribute to their total expenditure. Turning them into nobles might've just made them poorer in the long run.

"That's the big question."

"Are you doing anything for her family already?" I asked.

"The Ho family paid for their house to be rebuilt, and we've increased their supply of livestock. They're doing fairly well for themselves now."

This must've been a compromise given how bad it would've looked to do absolutely nothing for them. Everyone would've thought the Ho family was a bunch of cheapskates if the head's wife's family was left living in a hovel.

"And now my cousin's here working as a maid. Was that her idea?"

"That's right."

Hmm.

"If they wanted to deepen the ties between us, she wouldn't have asked to work for us like that. Maybe it's simply out of gratitude," I said.

“It could be. Do you think so?”

“That’s my guess. If they were hoping she might marry someone a lot richer, then having her work as a maid would have the opposite effect. I’m sure mom’s family understands that.”

If they wanted to strengthen ties between our two families, they could’ve done something more direct, like offering her up as a bride to a high-ranking knight. It would’ve been one thing if she was working directly for Her Majesty in the royal castle, but working for the Ho family—and not even in our head household at that—wasn’t going to put her on track to marry a noble.

“I thought the job was a poor fit for her too,” Rook said.

So he realized. Then why not stop her? Maybe it was hard to say no when the girl herself was asking for the job.

“It’d make sense for a distant relative. Your niece-in-law is too closely related.”

“Agreed,” Rook said.

“How old is she now?”

“Thirteen.”

Thirteen? That’s young enough to be considered child labor. Not that anyone’s going to make a fuss given this kingdom’s lack of any strict employment laws.

Her age meant it was four years too late for her to ever enter the Cultural Academy. It wasn’t impossible to send her there in the near future, but there were too many hurdles in the way.

“You could arrange for her to wed a boy from an influential branch family, just to be safe.”

“She’s too young. And she doesn’t want that—I asked her already.”

She doesn’t? Hmm...

Thirteen was definitely a little young for marriage. Though there was still the option of arranging for her to be married when she turned eighteen and letting her work here or study under a governess in the meantime.

“This is difficult. I’m not sure what to do,” I said.

“Me neither. No clue at all. I don’t get what her family was thinking.”

It actually might’ve been easier for Rook if they’d just come up and said, “We’re hoping she’ll marry into a nice warrior family. See what you can do for her.” At least that way, Beaule could’ve been trained to be a bride until she was old enough to be offered to an appropriate branch family.

“Farming families don’t lack intelligence,” I began, “but their way of looking at things is often quite different to ours. It *is* possible that they instructed Beaule to offer her services as a maid, thinking it’s a quick way to find their daughter a husband. Though I still think the most likely thing is that she wants to work for us as a show of gratitude, rather than having an ulterior motive.”

I’d attended school in both of my lives as a matter of course and received an education in various subjects. It was hard for me to imagine how people thought when they’d lived their whole lives without ever receiving an education of any kind.

“That may be...”

“Given that this isn’t a major incident, why don’t you stop giving it so much thought?” I suggested.

The matter was too trivial to be worth this much attention for someone in Rook’s position. No matter how he handled it, it wouldn’t turn into a scandal.

“She’s Suzuya’s family. I want to do right by her.”

Ah, that’s the issue.

“How much money are you making from that side job of yours, Yuri?”

This was a sudden change of topic.

“Nothing really. We haven’t made enough to recoup our capital investment so far. Overall, I’d say we’ve made a loss.”

“A loss? What do you mean by capital investment? Give me specifics.”

“Put simply, it’s as though we haven’t made enough to pay for things like the barns and birdcages on your ranch.”

“Ah, I get you. Nothing to worry about then.”

It was no surprise that Rook was understanding. He was an entrepreneur of sorts himself, after all. Capital expenditure wasn't something that could be recouped instantly. It was unreasonable to expect the cost of building a large barn to be recovered within a single year. Five or even ten years was more like it.

“That's right. I can't really say that I'm making money out of it.”

In terms of my finances, my wealth on paper was still the same. It was just business assets rather than cash now, so it wasn't fully accurate to say I'd made no money. But it was true that I had less cash to spend than I did when I started.

“I've got to wonder how much you spent,” Rook said.

Hmm... No harm in telling him, I suppose.

“I've used forty thousand ruga, and right now we're generating five thousand ruga of profit each month.”

“That's incredible. You'll be making money in no time.”

“Soon, yes. We're scaling up production, so our profits should increase too.”

For a startup, my company was performing incredibly well.

“You're full of surprises, Yuri.”

“I'm lucky because I've got a talented manager.”

Virtually all of the company management had been handled by Caph, so I had him to thank.

“Then why don't you hire Beaule?” Rook suggested.

The topic had abruptly changed back.

Huh?

“Why? What would that accomplish?”

“She could be some sort of secretary or assistant for you.”

Huh? I don't get it. What's he mean?

"I can't give her a position like that. What kind of idiot do you take me for?"

"It would just be for show. I can't have her here as a maid. Even our butlers don't know how to talk to her."

Maybe he's right, but...

"I'm going to have all the same problems."

"No, it won't be an issue if she's working for you. I just can't have one of my close relatives here in the residence working as a servant."

Yeah... Having your close family doing your housework is going to look bad to outsiders. I guess he's thinking that it'd look a lot better if she worked for me instead.

"Wouldn't it be good to have a close relative around who you can trust?" Rook said.

He's really twisting my arm here.

"I suppose it might..."

I am short-staffed. Maybe I could have her help out.

"But I won't allow her to commute to work from this residence," I added.

"Oh?"

"If she sets out from here, people will start to think it's a family business. I want it to be my own."

I couldn't stand it otherwise. This wasn't just a case of me wanting to be the king of my own castle. The problem was that there was a big difference between Rook's son running his own business, and Rook forcing his son to run a business. Back before Rook was head of the family, he definitely wouldn't have wanted anyone to think Gok had forced his troublesome brother to go off and manage the family ranch.

"Then what should I do?" Rook asked.

"I can provide her with her own place to live."

Rook frowned at the idea. "Yuri, you can't just let a girl live by herself."

“But she’s not going to feel comfortable here. She might be family, but I’m sure it’ll raise eyebrows if we give special treatment to a farmer’s daughter fresh out of the countryside.”

“That’s true. She didn’t say anything, but I’m sure she’s finding it hard to fit in here.”

I figured.

“For now, I can have her live near the man who’s managing my company. He’s well-known in the area, so I think she’ll be safe with him. But if that doesn’t work out, then I’ll let her commute from here. Don’t worry, I’m not casting a thirteen-year-old girl out and leaving her to fend for herself.”

“What sort of man is he?”

Ah jeez, he’s so overprotective. Caph isn’t the type to chase after teen girls.

“He’s in his late twenties. I don’t think he has any interest in younger girls, so you don’t have to worry about that.”

“All right. I’ll leave her to you then.”

How’d I get talked into this?

“All right. Though if she’s not happy about the idea, I won’t force her.”

“That’s fine,” Rook agreed.

IV

“Which means that I’ll be responsible for taking care of you from now on. Does this all sound all right? If it doesn’t...”

“It sounds quite all right to me.”

Beaule went along with the plan without a single argument. I’d expected her to question me at least a little about the arrangement, but she accepted everything I told her.

“Ah... Okay. That’s good.”

If I’d genuinely been her age—back when I was *actually* thirteen, I mean—this

whole situation would've set off alarm bells. I'd be thinking, *Is this really right? What am I getting myself into?*

"I'm sure you're aware, but I'm a student, so I don't need any full-time servants. I'd like you to quit being a maid."

"Very well." Beaule nodded.

"You're very agreeable, aren't you? You won't miss being a maid?"

"I was told I wasn't very good at it."

It sounds like she got bullied.

"Just for my information, in what way weren't you suited to it?"

"I broke some plates."

Ah...

"Anything else?"

"If I'm honest, I fell over while working yesterday and ruined a meal," she said unhappily.

She was either uncoordinated or just downright clumsy.

"Did they beat you for it?"

If they had, I'd have to do something about it.

"They didn't lay a hand on me, but they were very angry."

Now I understood why she was so unhappy. But if this was the full story, then she was definitely at fault. There was no denying that she wasn't cut out to be a maid.

"I don't know how I can be of service to you, but I'll try my best."

She bowed her head. Her attitude was commendable at least, but her unhappy state was visible from her face. Her bad experiences working as a maid must've left her depressed.

How am I going to cheer her up?

"Well..." I began.

I don't know what to say. How do I put this into words?

“What I need from you is honesty. I don't care about the mistakes you made working as a maid. In fact, I'm glad you told me rather than trying to cover them up. The truth is, the royal capital's full of competent people, but I have a hard time finding people I can trust. All I want from you is...”

How should I sum this up?

“Don't hide anything, speak frankly, and always be honest.”

“I...understand.” Beaule nodded.

“If you can do that, then just do your best without pushing yourself too hard. That'll be enough for me. Anyway, let's get going.”



I had begun to see countless beggars whenever I walked through the city.

They were mostly refugees from the Kilhina Kingdom. Though a border separated the two Shanti kingdoms, our cultures were very similar, so displacement wasn't as tough on these people as it might've been. The problem was that there were so many laborers competing for what work was available that most had no hope of making a living.

Shanti people weren't idiots—they'd known since long ago that the Shiyalta Kingdom would be the last to fall. That was why, whenever a kingdom fell, people fled here rather than their nearest neighbor. And they'd been smart enough to make that choice for generations, so Shiyalta had long been home to many refugees.

The chieftain families that oversaw each region dealt with this by cultivating new land ready to offer to freshly arrived refugees. There were several villages—both new and old—that had been established for this purpose in the Ho family's territory. Many of them were named after the ruined hometowns that the founding residents had left behind.

But the Shiyalta Kingdom had never been particularly fertile. There was a limit to how many we could take in, and now we found ourselves short on habitable land. Even Ho Province to the south had reached the limits of what intensive

farming could achieve. There was nothing left but the northern regions and mountainous areas to offer people.

The death of each kingdom hadn't changed things much here in the past, but now that our nearest neighbor was about to fall, the unprecedented number of refugees caused an influx of people like nothing seen before. The people were welcome, of course, but jobs were limited. Unless the situation somehow improved, people would soon be dying of starvation on the streets.

We were headed toward Caph's home. Although it was in a residential area, the multistory buildings had first-floor shops that faced out onto the streets. Despite it being a holiday, the area was full of activity.

As we walked, I groaned at the sight before me.

"What's wrong?" Beaule asked as she noticed my troubled face.

Some people weren't just there to beg—they clearly lived in the streets. It didn't look so unsafe that I was scared to go there myself, but I felt uneasy abandoning a girl to live there alone. It was just asking for trouble.

"Everything's fine," I assured her.

Things *weren't* fine, but I wanted to talk it over with Caph first. Beaule's new home hadn't been chosen yet, and we didn't have to make a decision today.

"If I'm causing problems for you, please feel free to tell me."

Beaule must've thought I was worried over her history of mistakes.

"It's not that. I'm just looking at the state of the area."

"Oh, I see. I know how you feel. It looks like it's flourishing to me too," she replied.

That definitely *hadn't* been my impression. But Beaule hadn't been in the royal capital very long, so it must've seemed impressive to her. There was nothing like this back in Kalakumo, the capital of Ho Province.

Kalakumo was lively in its own way, but it lacked the bustling activity of the royal capital. The wide array of trade going on here made it the nation's financial center. All the activity also made for a flurry of sights and sounds as we walked down the city streets.

“Flourishing, yes, but the city is very different from the countryside. Take care here.”

A man would learn some harsh life lessons by getting into trouble here, but things could be *much* worse for a woman. I didn’t want her to fear the city, but I didn’t want her to have a bad experience that traumatized her for life either.

“Oh. In what way should I take care?”

“Well... Always lock your door. Don’t walk around at night. Hmm... Don’t believe anything a stranger tells you. Think before buying anything that seems expensive because you’re probably getting ripped off. What else...”

The list was endless. A young girl fresh from the countryside was easy prey.

“Just assume the worst of everyone, don’t be scared to say no, and talk to me or Caph whenever you’re unsure. By the way, Caph is one of my employees we’re going to meet today.”

“All right. I understand... I’ll remember that I can talk to Mr. Caph and Lord Yuri.”

“That’s right. Don’t hesitate to ask questions while you’re getting used to the place. That’s the safest option.” The last thing I wanted to see was my own cousin fall prey to some evil scam.

“Thank you for your— Ah!” Beaule shrieked and stumbled toward me. Someone had just bumped into her.

A little boy—his face hidden by a hat—stopped for a moment to bow to us, presumably as an apology for bumping into Beaule.

“Hold it right there,” I said before he could walk away.

Without so much as looking back, the boy set off running straight ahead at full speed...or at least he tried. He only made it two steps before the work bag I’d been carrying, heavy and packed to the brim with paperwork, hit him in the back and sent him falling flat on his face.

“Hold it, kid.”

“The hell’s your problem?!”

When the boy looked back at us, I noticed that he was about the same age as Beaule.

“You just stole Beaule’s purse, didn’t you?”

“Huh? N-No I didn’t!”

Beaule patted her jacket. It was a terrible place to keep a coin purse—a bulging outer pocket was an ideal target for pickpockets. I regretted not noticing or saying anything earlier.

“Hand it over.” I held out my hand to the boy and gestured with my fingers.

“Gah...” the boy grumbled as he reached into his jacket pocket.

“Don’t even try it,” I said, causing him to stop.

The boy studied me closely. His eyes were malicious and threatening—he hadn’t given up yet. I knew he was more likely to pull out a blade than Beaule’s purse.

“I mean it. If you draw that thing, I won’t go easy on you. Just put the purse on the ground and leave.”

“What d’you need all that money for? You nobles are all—”

Oh, here we go. I don’t have time for this kid.

“Don’t change the subject. You either fight or you walk away. Draw it if you want to fight. If you don’t want to die today, put down the purse and leave. I’ll give you three more seconds.”

He remained silent.

This is annoying. I really couldn’t care less about this stupid kid.

“One, two, three. All right, let’s do this.”

I didn’t bother waiting three whole seconds as I quickly finished counting. I walked toward the boy, intending to drag him off to the city guards. He panicked, reached into a different pocket, pulled out the purse, and threw it onto the ground. Then, after cautiously rising to his feet, he bolted.

I sighed as I picked up the purse and brushed some of the dirt from it.

“Thank you,” Beale said as I handed it to her.

“Is it the right purse?”

“Yes. It’s fine. It’s definitely mine.”

“That’s good.”

“Um, I’m sorry... I was careless.”

“You couldn’t have seen him coming from behind. But next time keep your purse somewhere where it’s harder to steal.”

“Yes, I will. I’m in your debt. My mom embroidered a good luck charm into this purse.”

Beale held her cloth purse close like it was precious to her. It was made from a durable fabric that looked like sailcloth and had a unique, colorful pattern embroidered onto it. It must’ve held special meaning where she was from.

“Good thing you got it back. All right, let’s go. You’re not injured, are you?”

“No, I’m fine. I can walk,” Beale said while shifting her weight from foot to foot.



“Hey, Caph! You in there?!” I yelled while knocking on the door.

“It’s open,” Caph called out from inside.

“Okay, I’m coming in.”

As odd as it felt to walk into someone’s home like this, I opened the door and entered.

“Yuri? What’s up?”

Caph was lying on his favorite dirty sofa—a filthy thing, stained black, with errant padding protruding here and there. I was surprised he could even sit on it. He raised his head to look at me.

“Never mind what’s up. Why’s your door not locked?”

“It’s never locked.”

“Burglars weren’t going to bother with you before you had a job, but it’s

different now. We had a run-in with a pickpocket just a minute ago.”

“Huh? Did they steal anything?”

“No, we drove him off. But there are thieves around, so you can’t just leave your door unlocked.”

“I’d love to lock it, I really would, but it’s broken.”

Well, that would certainly explain things if it had been broken the whole time. Still, at least he could’ve barred it from the inside.

“Forget that. Who’s the girl?” Caph had spotted Beaule.

“Ah, I was wondering if we could employ her. Her name’s Beaule Emanon.”

“Nice to meet you,” Beaule said with a polite bow.

Caph’s expression scared me a little. “Yuri...”

“Yes?”

“Never let your girl get involved in your business. I’ve seen people do it. It doesn’t end well.”

He’s getting completely the wrong idea here. Just how precocious does he think I am?

“Beaule’s my cousin.”

“Huh? Cousin? Then she’s a chieftain family’s girl. What’re you thinking?”

“A cousin from my mother’s side. Her family are all farmers from out in the woods.”

“Ah, all right then.”

I’d never told him much about my family’s circumstances, so I thought I’d have to do a lot of explaining, but he apparently knew all about us already.

“So now you want her to work for us?”

“I was thinking maybe she could be your assistant for now.”

“If you say so, I won’t argue.” As expected, he wasn’t keen on the idea.

“I’ll do my very best,” Beaule said with a slight bow.

“Where’s she living right now?” Caph asked.

“In my family’s city residence, but that’s not really working out. I *had* planned to get her a room here on the floor below, but I’m having second thoughts about leaving a girl alone in an area with thieves lurking around.”

“Sounds like it’s time I moved,” Caph said, like that was no big deal.

“You’re going to move?”

“Yeah. The landlord won’t send out a locksmith no matter how much I complain, and people around here are starting to talk about how much money I make. I have to sleep with one eye open.”

He was lucky a burglar hadn’t ransacked his home already.

“You might as well get yourself a room where we can store equipment. The company can pay,” I said.

“Thanks. I’m hard up right now.”

Caph was still working without pay because we hadn’t decided on his salary. A lot of our money inevitably passed through his hands because he was the one managing everything, but thankfully he didn’t seem to be pocketing any of it.

“Then let’s talk about your salary.”

“Sure.”

I walked farther into the room and sat down without asking.

“My father already found out about the business, so I figured I might as well register us officially as Ho Company.”

“Ho Company? Not Ho Trading?” Caph sounded pleased by the idea.

“We don’t just trade; we manufacture too. ‘Trading’ wouldn’t make sense.”

“You’ve got a point.”

A company with “trading” in the name would normally be a group of people who made a profit out of selling goods made by others. There were also trading companies consisting of an individual—or several artisans with their own workshops—who produced goods to sell wholesale, but people like that generally formed collectives through organizations known as guilds. Those were

controlled by the witches. Since we were handling both production and our own sales, “Company” was a fitting name for us.

“Now, about your salary.”

“Are you going to start giving me a *profit* share?”

Caph placed emphasis on the word “profit.” He hadn’t forgotten our agreement.

“Caph Ornette—I’m appointing you president of the company.”

“I’m the president? I’ll give it my best.”

The idea seemed to sit well with him. He bowed his head to me, almost like a knight gratefully accepting some important assignment.

“But if I’m the company president, what’re you gonna do?”

“I’m the company’s chairman. I’ll oversee everything. As our president, you’ll be like the head manager.”

“So everything’ll be just like it was?”

“Not quite. Some of the managers responsible for the company’s operation are going to be made board members. They’ll hold meetings known as board meetings. My plan is for everyone who’s a board member to be paid a share of our profit, or to receive a salary that’s based on company performance.”

“Board members now? We’re going to keep expanding?”

“Yes, but not too much. Once we’re a little bigger, I want us to have a product development department. There’ll be a board member responsible for it, of course. Then they’ll present their results along with the department’s current goals in board meetings.”

“Sure. Sounds good to me.” Caph smirked like someone with a prank up their sleeve. He seemed to like the idea.

Nice to have him on board.

Chapter 5 — The World's Secrets

I

I was at the waterwheel that day, messing around with something.

“Hey, Yuri!” Caph appeared, looking unusually excited. “I’ve done it!”

Some of the employees began to crowd around him.

“This is it! It’s exactly what I wanted!” he cried, a pile of dry wooden fibers resting on his hand.

Breaking the fibers down this well by boiling them had been no easy feat. Sodium hydroxide would’ve been best for this task, but it seemed that boiling them in limewater for a long time produced fairly solid results.

I was just as pleased as Caph, so much so that I wanted to bury my face in it. This would alleviate the bottleneck imposed by raw materials. Caph would no longer need to spend tens of hours going from one tailor to the next.

“Try using it for paper right away,” I instructed. “And let’s try boiling different types of wood too, just to see what breaks down best.”

“Yeah, we want that thin paper you’re always talking about. I get it.”

Caph went straight to a papermaking mold.

While he’d been trying to extract fibers by boiling wood, I’d been outside working with an odd-looking device that I’d bought. It was a secondhand distillation apparatus which had originally been designed for making spirits, but I’d been boiling oil in it.

I’d figured that refined crude oil might be ideal for the wax paper we needed for our mimeograph stencils. After I’d looked into it, I found that it was possible to get hold of some from oil fields here in the kingdom. In fact, there were even some in Ho Province, so obtaining the stuff had been easy.

To me, crude oil—with its countless uses—was the lifeblood of industry. But

to others, it was just weird black stuff that wasn't good for anything. Only a handful of scholars were even aware of its existence, and the kingdom's oil reserves had been left untouched.

Crude oil could be burned, but using it in a hearth or kiln without refining it first produced nasty odors due to presence of volatile fractions, and tar would build up in chimneys and inside a hearth itself. Wood and coal were so much better as fuel sources that no one thought to use oil, but its usefulness would become clear once I'd refined it. That was why I was engrossed in my experiments with boiling that day.

It was a fine day for distillation, as odd as that sounded, because winter was approaching. The cold river water was ideal for cooling the apparatus.

Using the different boiling points of the components in the liquid to separate them was a process known as fractional distillation. In the fractional distillation of crude oil, the highly volatile components—such as naphtha, kerosene, and diesel oil—would evaporate at low temperatures. Things like fuel oil would evaporate next, and eventually fractions, like asphalt, would be left behind.

Unfortunately, my distillation process was so imprecise that diesel oil, gasoline, and naphtha all came out as a mixture. That said, the liquid I was steadily accumulating in the metal vessel was smooth and clear despite containing multiple fractions. I'd been collecting it in hopes that it would make good fuel. It was stored in a barrel that had been prepared by coating the interior with asphalt and letting it dry.

Naphtha was a great substance because it remained a liquid at room temperature, but it also solidified easily enough to get stuck in the cooling column of the distillation apparatus. Maintaining a temperature just high enough to keep it coming out in droplets required a lot of skill with the primitive gear I was working with. Even after repeated trial and error, I couldn't get good results, and the most effective techniques I'd found so far had only yielded tiny amounts of product.

I had a few ideas for more effective approaches, but all of them required large-scale facilities. I was beginning to consider giving up on oil and looking for something else. There were still various types of plant wax that I hadn't tested,

so switching to those was likely to provide quicker results.

Switching my focus now wouldn't mean that the experiments with crude oil had been a total waste though—I'd gotten some highly volatile oils out of it. Liquids that would easily ignite when near an open flame couldn't be extracted from plants or animals, so what I had would definitely be useful. Another thought was that clear liquids capable of evaporating at room temperature were excellent solvents for use in paints and coatings.

Crude oil was a horrible thing to work with. The labor was hot and tiring. My hands got covered with gunk that wouldn't wash off, to say nothing of the smell—it would make my head throb even when I wore a mask.

The thought that kept coming back to my mind was, *What's a lazy guy like me doing messing around like this? This is no job for the company chairman. Can't someone else do it?*

In any case, I would have to stop working soon because I had plans that afternoon.



"Sham, are you sure this is right?"

"It should be," Sham said calmly.

No, it can't be.

"It's nineteen point five degrees? But it should only vary by...plus or minus zero point three degrees at the very most."

"It should?"

While reading over one of my journals recently, I found I'd actually written "the axial tilt is twenty-three degrees." If I ever forgot information like that, there'd be no way to look it up; it would literally be an irrecoverable loss. That was why I always noted down everything I could remember.

Axial tilt referred to the angle between the Earth's orbital axis and a line perpendicular to its orbital plane. It was what gave rise to the seasons, made summer days long, and winter days short. I was sure that it never went below twenty degrees.

I started to wonder whether this planet was slightly different from Earth after all. I already knew there were some differences—like the fact that Shanish people had hair growing from their pointed ears—but this was too much.

Sham had to be wrong. But she always took the greatest of care when it came to astronomical observations, and I knew her method was correct because she'd explained it to me. Deriving the axial tilt was such a simple calculation for someone like her that she couldn't possibly mess it up.

"So why'd you call me here?" Lilly asked.

We were in a private room of the teahouse in front of the Grand Library. I'd been making use of it fairly often since Komimi had introduced me to the place. Tea and desserts had been spread out in front of us.

I'd better forget about the axial tilt for now.

"There's something I'd like you both to make for me."

"Both of us?" Lilly and Sham looked at each other.

"What I'd like is a celestial navigation tool."

"Celestial what?" Lilly tilted her head to one side.

"Put simply, celestial navigation is a way of determining where you are on the planet without using any landmarks. It's for use out on the open ocean."

"But why? What good is somethin' like that?"

"Right now..." I paused while I considered how to explain it. "If a ship sails out until land isn't visible anymore, the sailors quickly lose track of their position. In other words, they get lost."

"Ain't that what compasses are for?"

"On land, you'll always have some idea where you are if you walk straight while using a compass to determine your heading, but that won't work in the sea. We're talking about open water—everything looks the same. Plus, ships generally travel in zig-zag patterns to catch the wind, so it's not as easy to simply travel in one direction."

"Well, if you say so. I don't really get it, though."

It seemed my explanation had gone over Lilly's head, but that wouldn't stop us from moving the discussion forward.

"Imagine you're trying to reach your destination blindfolded while your life's on the line. Who'd want to board a ship like that? But if you can determine your position using celestial navigation, it's suddenly not such a risky journey."

"Hmm... But how would anyone figure out their position?"

"Well... Right now the sun's setting in various places around the planet, but it's rising in other places. The sun that's above our heads right now looks like a morning sun in some places, but an evening sun in others. Can you imagine that?"

"Now that I think about it... Sure, it makes sense."

Heliocentrism wasn't a well-accepted theory in this kingdom, but Lilly had spent enough time with Sham to be familiar with it.

It was around noon where we were, but at that same moment, the sun that shone high above us was sinking under the horizon when viewed from certain places, or rising up from it in others.

"Which means that there should be just one place on the planet where the sun is visible at a given position in the sky at a particular time of day."

"Hmm... Maybe..." Lilly was having a hard time accepting the idea.

"Excuse me, Lilly, but Yuri is right about that."

Wow. Sham's respectful toward Lilly?

"Do you get all this, Sham?" Lilly asked.

"I do! We'd need to take equipment errors into consideration, of course, but given an accurate measurement, it's obvious that the position of a celestial body at a predetermined place and time will correspond to a single location on the planet. You can think of it like simultaneous equations! Just imagine that the equations include the time and the celestial object's position, and the variables to be derived are latitude and longitude."

Sham appeared to understand the idea intuitively. As usual, I was surprised at how quickly she'd managed to wrap her head around it.

“Exactly. So if you know the precise time and you have an apparatus for measuring the angles of celestial bodies, you can use that information in a method for deriving your current position.”

“All right, but won’t it need some awful complicated math? It ain’t like someone can check the time, measure the angle, and say, ‘I reckon we’re about here.’ I mean sure, if they took Sham along, she could do it, but...”

“We can compile charts that summarize the calculation results, and then the crew can look up their position against their time and angle values. Just think of it like looking something up in a dictionary.”

“Ah, that’ll work... Yeah, I get that.” Lilly nodded, though it wasn’t clear whether she’d fully understood.

I’d never expected her to understand everything. She didn’t have to. Sham had a perfect grasp of the concept, so she’d be able to tell Lilly all about the method and its limitations. And since Lilly often worked with intricate clockwork, making a sextant wouldn’t be too much of a challenge for her.

The problem was Sham. Putting together a book of calculation results would be a chore. Just working out values for a small patch of ocean was going to be a massive undertaking.

“Sham, could you make the charts? They don’t have to be precise. Rough estimates will be good enough.”

“I think I can. But we don’t have to use the sun—any star would work.”

“Let’s use the sun because it’s the easiest to locate. Remember, the person using it might be an amateur who doesn’t even know the constellations.”

“But using the sun won’t be very accurate. Celestial bodies are pretty big, and no one’s drawn points on their centers, far as I know. Heh heh.” Sham chuckled to herself.

Wait... Was Sham making a joke just now?

I sneaked a glance at Lilly and saw she looked unsure too. She nodded to me, though I wasn’t sure what that signaled.

Uh, okay... Looks like Sham’s working hard on her weak points. I’d hate to

discourage her.

“Ha ha... You’re right,” I said, forcing a laugh. “But we don’t need precision. The position of the sun will be good enough.”

A ship wouldn’t end up in a completely different location just because their numbers were a little off. They’d just know a slightly more general area. It was nothing that would stop them reaching their rough destination.

Someone trying to reach an island merely needed to get within view of it. If it wasn’t where they expected, they could simply keep searching nearby. Getting to a city port was even easier, since most of them had lighthouses that were easy to spot once the ship got near.

The bigger problem was passing the island or landmass due to not having an accurate idea of the ship’s position. The crew wouldn’t even know they’d gone too far. If they continued to plow ahead in a vain attempt to reach a place they’d already passed, they’d probably never find it. Such ships were destined to sail aimlessly through unfamiliar waters. When a shipwreck was found with the crew all dead from starvation or thirst, this was often the cause. To use a crude analogy, a single sign post pointing them in the general direction would’ve made all the difference.

“Okay. Though when I make observations, even my recorded values for the sun are fairly accurate,” Sham noted proudly.

Oh good. She’s not feeling bad about the joke.

“But what will they use as a basis for time?” Sham asked.

“The ship’s clock can be set to the time here in Sibiak. We’ll call that Sibiak Standard Time.”

I wasn’t sure it was right to make up my own time zones, but I didn’t feel much need to keep everything centered on the UK now that I was in another world. It didn’t matter where the center was, and only Shanti people would be using my system anyway.

“Okay. Got it.”

“You don’t have to cover the entire world. Hmm... The longitude should be a

range with Sibiak at the center extending to the 120th meridian west, then the latitude should go to the 10th parallel north and to the equator in the south.”

“Got it.”

I can't believe she's so accepting. I just gave her a ton of work.

“And now, Lilly... My request to you.”

“Yuri...” Lilly smiled. “I’m already strugglin’ with the printin’ equipment you asked me for.”

Oh.

“You can’t squeeze this in?”

“And I haven’t made my glasses yet...”

“Okay...”

“How come you never ask me for those papermakin’ molds anymore?”

“The company recently took on a skilled carpenter, so... Yeah...”

“Oh, so that’s how it is?”

I guess that's a no. I've been asking a lot from her already... She has to put her studies first, I suppose.

“All right. I won’t pressure you into it,” I said.

If I couldn’t count on Lilly, I’d have to try looking around for someone else who could help. The problem with that was that they’d want me to explain the device to them along with some of my plans for it. I’d hoped to avoid that.

I furrowed my brow as I began to think.

“Well, jeez. Fine, I’ll do it,” Lilly said.

“Huh?”

“How can I say no when I see a boy lookin’ so down?”

What? How'd she get so agreeable all of a sudden?

Lilly smiled as she put one hand to her cheek and waved the other in front of her.

Looks like old women's gestures exist in this world too... Not that she's an old woman.

"You don't need it fast, right?" she asked.

"No rush for the time being."

"Then you can count on me. Give me a little more detail, though."

"Something like this."

I took out a piece of paper with a simple schematic for a sextant drawn on it.

A sextant was a device that used a reflection from a mirror to measure the angle between a celestial body and the horizon. It could also be used to measure the angle between two stars.

It was like a small telescope, but with a mirror covering the right half of its far end. When someone put their eye to it, they could see things in the distance through the left half. The right half simply displayed the mirror's reflection. That would then be aimed at another rotating mirror that was attached to a protractor.

To use it, the hollow tube's left half would be aligned with the horizon, and then the rotating mirror would be adjusted to change what was reflected in the other mirror. Once they were positioned so that the horizon and the target celestial body were aligned in the user's vision, the value on the protractor could be taken as the celestial body's angle.

"Wow... Looks like a real pain," Lilly said as she studied the schematic I'd drawn.

"You think it'll be difficult?"

"It's the glass and mirrors... A tube ain't trouble, but this needs smoked glass. Sure is a curious idea."

People could stare at stars just fine, but they'd need darkened glass to look at the sun. Without it, they might go blind. But even before that, they'd be too dazzled to use the device. I'd never heard it called "smoked glass" before, but some sort of tinting was definitely needed.

"Is this something you can order from a glassblower's workshop?" I asked.

“Should be.”

“You can go ahead and order ten of those.”

“Ten? That’ll be cheaper per piece, but...”

“Don’t worry about the cost. I’m counting on you.”

The plan from here on was to give one of these to each ship. Glass wouldn’t rot with time, so having extra parts ready would be smart.

“All right, got it. But this is gonna cost you.”

“I’m not worried about that.”

“Just how much money are you makin’ these days?”

“Well... A good amount.”

Business was, it was fair to say, booming. Now that we’d found a way to use wood, we’d solved the problem of material shortages. The growth in our profits was accelerating.

With so much money being made from paper, we could consider expanding to oil lamps and lighters using refined oil. Money wasn’t going to be an issue.

“But what’re you gonna do with all that cash? Ain’t you rich now...? And it’s not like you started off poor either.”

She’s not wrong.

“You can never have too much money,” I said.

“Sure, but it’s excessive. Why work so hard? I get that you’ve got free time in your afternoons, but why do so much that all your time disappears?”

It was a reasonable objection. I had no desire to live a life of wealth and luxury. Earning more money wouldn’t change my lifestyle or make me spend more. It was hard for anyone to see *why* I was so focused on profit.

I liked to tell everyone that I had the time, and that more money was always better, but it wasn’t the real reason. There was another motivation at the back of my mind.

“Take a job with my company, then I’ll tell you,” I said to put her off for now.

“Your company?”

“We’re calling it Ho Company. My father found out about it all already.”

“Ah, I see.”

“People know about the company, but we’ve still got corporate secrets.”

“Count me in,” Lilly said.

Huh?

“What did you just say?”

“I said count me in.”

No, no, no. I know I just suggested it, but...

“We’re not just playing around, you know?”

“If I join Ho Company, I can still quit whenever, right?”

Well, yeah. “Don’t sign up unless you’re with us for life!” isn’t our corporate policy or anything.

“That’s right, but the work wouldn’t pay as well as the jobs I’ve given you up to now. You’d be on a fixed salary rather than being paid for individual orders. I think it’d make you worse off. You wouldn’t want that, would you?”

“That don’t bother me none.”

“It don’t bother her”? What gives?

“It’ll be the same work as always, right? And you won’t have me holed up in some little room of yours from morning till dusk, will you?”

“No, but... You just mentioned quitting. If you quit after a month, it’ll be a waste of my time.”

“You think I’d do somethin’ like that? I’m not some lowlife.”

“Well, in that case, I’ll be happy to hire you.”

I certainly *was* happy to have Lilly on board. She was useful to have around because she was a skilled craftsman and she understood the scientific language I often used.

“I’ll join too,” the smaller of the two girls suddenly announced, with her hand raised in the air.

“You can’t join, Sham.”

“Why not?” she asked huffily.

“Because...I’d get in trouble with Satsuki.”

The honest reason was that I didn’t expect Sham to be well-suited to a company job. If she joined us, she’d have to carry out research in applied sciences like engineering that had industrial applications. Since her interests were advanced math, space science, and theoretical physics, she’d have to change her focus upon joining the company. I didn’t want to force Sham onto a different track.

“You’re no fun,” Sham said, sounding like an everyday schoolgirl.

“I think that’s everything. Let’s end it here for today.”

Welp, that’s another busy day over with.

I stood up to leave.

“All right. See you around... Yeah, right! You ain’t goin’ anywhere till you’ve answered the question!”

She remembered... She sure let me think I’d gotten out of it just now.

“Okay, but you absolutely must keep this secret,” I warned her.



“I think this kingdom’s death is inevitable.”

“What...?” Lilly replied.

“I don’t know whether it’ll be five years from now or ten, but this kingdom will die before long. No one can prevent it.”

“What’re you sayin’? This kingdom’s...got its problems, sure, but...everything looks just fine to me right now.”

“Things are far from ‘fine.’ Of the nine Shanti kingdoms, the Kulati have brought six of them to ruin so far. What makes the Shiyalta Kingdom so special

that it won't share the same fate?"

Two Shanti kingdoms remained, while the others had been wiped out because of the Kulati.

There was, however, one exception—the Trafé Kingdom. It existed on an island that was most likely Iceland, and was known in this world as Aisa Island. Trafé's royal family had come to an end on its own as a result of repeated consanguineous marriages and interbreeding. Aisa Island had been incorporated into the Shiyalta Kingdom after that.

"Well..."

"I've been studying history for five years now. I can't find a single difference between our kingdom and those that have fallen. Everyone ignores the fact that we're just as dysfunctional as every other dead kingdom. Meanwhile, the Kilhina Kingdom is breaking down before our eyes. The Kulati aren't going to have a change of heart. It's plain to see that we're on the path to destruction, just like every other Shanti kingdom."

It was true that people were deliberately turning a blind eye. If the status quo caused enough discontent to motivate a revolution, I'd welcome a civil war that raged through the entire kingdom. As bloody as the conflict might be, it could change our fate. Sadly, no such uprising was likely while the forces of conservatism held so much power.

"But who's to say things ain't going to change between now and then?" Lilly asked.

"You're right. One possibility is that Princess Carol will show strong leadership and right our kingdom's failings...but that's just wishful thinking. I'd rather take my fate into my own hands by making use of the options that are open to me."

Even as I said it, I didn't actually believe that the possibility existed. The fatal flaw in the Shiyalta Kingdom's politics was that power wasn't at all consolidated in the royal family.

Our situation would be very different if the crown held absolute authority. Carol might grow up and then wield her power like a scythe, cutting away the rot that blighted our kingdom. A series of reforms might shape us into a strong

nation capable of taking on the Kulati. Such a path could be opened to us. Dictatorships came with serious drawbacks, but they also removed many obstacles that prevented bold solutions from being enacted when a threat approached.

Unfortunately for us, the royal family lacked the necessary power to pull this off.

Responsibility for military and internal affairs was split between five chieftain families and seven witch families. The royal family had an army of just under seven thousand soldiers—the first order of the royal guard—under their direct control. They also presided over the senate and acted as the kingdom’s representative during diplomatic negotiations. In addition, they could issue orders to chieftain families (though these were more like suggestions in practice). Unfortunately, they didn’t wield much power beyond that. These weren’t small things, but it was far from absolute control.

No matter how hard Carol worked in that environment, she wouldn’t be able to fix anything. She’d lack power from the start, and she’d be prevented from exercising what little authority she had. Her advice would be listened to, but not acted on without approval via an archaic political system. To make matters worse, the system was engineered to ensure that even the royal family could be suppressed if they resorted to violence.

If the royal family wasn’t up to the task, then who was?

With the exception of the Ho family, the chieftain families were cowards who preferred to stay home and polish their spears. They lacked the backbone needed for a coup d’état. And as for us, our forces were still being reassembled. They’d been utterly crumbled up through overuse in expeditions. As much as I hated to say it about my own flesh and blood, a chieftain family with no military strength was useless. A coup d’état was far beyond us.

The witches, meanwhile, were the embodiment of conservatism itself. Their families were merely crime syndicates, and every bit as wicked as the name “witch” suggested. Entrusting our kingdom to them would do nothing but hasten our decline.

“Then what can we do?” Lilly asked.

There was only one way out—we would run.

“This is why we’re developing celestial navigation. If we won’t get lost on the open ocean, we can go anywhere we like. It’ll make all the difference, because once this kingdom falls, escape to open water or enslavement by the Kulati will be our only options.”

“Well, maybe...”

“But we’re talking about an absolute last resort here. Maybe it’ll never happen, and I’ll just be left with a lot of money and some unnecessary plans. But it’s worth being prepared.”

“All right...”

“If listening to all this has lowered your opinion of me, feel free to quit now. Just promise you’ll keep it to yourself.”

“You don’t need to worry about that none. I ain’t angry at all. It’s just...you’ve sure given me a lot to think about.”

“In that case, I’ll leave you the money for the bill so you can enjoy some more tea while you think it over. I have to go.” She’d be able to process things more clearly without me around. Plus, I genuinely *was* busy.

I put enough silver coins on the table to cover everything before leaving the private room.

II

“In that case, I’ll leave you the money for the bill so you can enjoy some more tea while you think it over. I have to go now.”

After Yuri had left, Lilly Amian counted the silver coins he’d left on the table. At a rough estimate, he’d left twice the amount needed to cover the bill. She could’ve kept the extra for herself, but instead, she called the server over to order more tea and desserts.

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll bring out your order soon.”

After taking Lilly’s order, the cheerful server left the room.

“Whew...” Lilly sighed.

Her mind went back to everything Yuri had said. *He’s right*, she thought.

Lilly Amian had been born on the far side of the mountains near a small gorge carved out by a river known to the locals as Yana Gorge. It formed part of the territory belonging to the Amian family.

Lilly’s father was the local ruler, which meant he was a noble. The Amians were neither knights nor witches, however.

It wasn’t an uncommon arrangement. The kingdom’s five chieftain families were powerful authorities responsible for vast areas, and many of the knight families serving under them were families like Lilly’s. Minor knight families like hers were included in a chieftain family’s list of subjects, but only at the very bottom, and the head of family generally didn’t hold a knighthood. As subjects in name only, they never dispatched soldiers to the battlefields.

Most of these families, Lilly’s included, were “castaway nobles.” Despite technically being knight families, they were more commonly known as “custodians” and treated very differently from an ordinary knight family. The head of family would never need to command soldiers, so it wasn’t necessary for them to graduate from the Knight Academy. This meant women were also eligible for the headship. The family’s only responsibility was to recruit a given number of soldiers from their own territory and place them under their chieftain family’s command in times of great need.

The Amian family had once been a powerful witch family from the Tena Kingdom, and—like most powerful witch families—they could trace their ancestry back to the empire’s heyday. But that meant little now.

Tena’s witch families had been bound to the royal family by stronger ties than in most kingdoms throughout history. In the later days, the kingdom’s ruler was known as the “witch queen.”

The queen would take on the surname Kwada Shaltl, but the royal family’s lineage was intermixed with those of twelve families known as the “witches of witches.” A queen was always chosen from among those families. The Amian family formed part of that bloodline. But these twelve families had since ceased to exist completely, with the exception of Lilly’s.

This knowledge was now only known within a handful of families and a few history books stored in the Grand Library. Now that the Tena Kingdom had fallen, and Lilly's ancestors had fled to the Shiyalta Kingdom as a result, the once-revered bloodline of the Amian family was of no importance whatsoever.

Witches from collapsed kingdoms received no help from witches in other kingdoms, even if they asked for it. They made their money by embezzling from the kingdom's economy and its government. They also profited by abusing the authority granted to them by the royal family and powerful merchants. Such family businesses were always highly territorial, so when castaway competition from other kingdoms came seeking help, they were treated coldly. They might be offered shelter for a night, but they were never given any authority, nor any means of making a living.

The Amian family had therefore abandoned its former trade and begged for help from a chieftain family known as the Noza family. They offered up gold that they'd risked their lives to carry with them, and in return they were made custodians.

Custodians were exempt from serving as knights, but being removed from the stresses of military responsibilities certainly didn't mean that they could live peaceful lives focused solely on managing their territory. In lieu of military service, custodians had to pay a cash tribute to the local chieftain family, in addition to some proportion of what they collected in taxes. Since tributes tended to be large sums, the Amian family had never been able to keep much of the revenue generated by collecting taxes in their territory.

The family's income varied greatly from one year to the next. A series of poor harvests would naturally have an impact on the taxes they could collect. As tax revenue fell, the proportion owed to the Noza family would be a smaller sum, but the cash tribute remained fixed. This meant that the total amount that the Amian family paid to the Noza family could actually exceed what they'd collected in taxes during particularly bad years.

What little they could save was needed to cover those bad years. The life of a noble custodian was so meager that sometimes they'd even pick up tools and work their own fields.

This arrangement led some to refer to custodian families by another name: a chieftain's coin purse. They generally became knight families for the sake of attaining noble status, but most lost the means to afford their tributes after a few years. The family would be left in ruin once their fortune was finally exhausted. Even if they used their wealth to send their sons to the Knight Academy, they'd remain in their position unless they were granted a place within the chieftain family's orders of knights. Unless they'd been blessed with an exceptionally talented son, they still wouldn't be able to reinvent themselves as a conventional knight family and escape the need to pay tributes.

This situation meant that every long-lived custodian family had some other means of making money besides taxing their territory. Such means included crafting items from the bones of beasts, selling the highest-quality blades and ceramics under well-reputed brands, or producing furniture using the local trees.

The Amian family produced mechanical devices.

Lilly's great-grandfather had started their machine-crafting business. He was a dexterous man with a fondness for gadgets and gizmos, so he'd pawned the family's prized jewels to buy the tools he'd need to make clocks. His creations were large pieces that were coated with lustrous varnish and decorated with intricate engravings in a traditional Tena style. The family quickly established its reputation, and then accumulated the equipment needed to manufacture miniaturized clocks as pocket watches. That decision had further served in increasing their profits.

Following her great-grandfather's death, Lilly's father took over the business. By this point, the production of mechanical devices had become the main source of income for the Amian family.

Lilly had been educated from a young age in preparation for inheriting the business someday. Ever since she'd been a young child, she'd studied mechanical devices, metalworking, and wood engravings. She had no time left for play.

She'd finally been sent to the Cultural Academy once she'd reached the age of ten, making her the first child of the Amian family to be educated at the

Cultural Academy since their arrival in the Shiyalta Kingdom. She studied there so that she could learn elementary politics, tax systems, and law—knowledge she might need to manage her territory. More importantly, graduating from the Cultural Academy was a great point of distinction for a local ruler.

The tuition fees were too high for a custodian family to send their children there as a matter of course. After Lilly entered, there were only two students in the dorm who were heirs to custodian families. And although the Amian family had grown wealthy enough to send a daughter there, they couldn't be lavish in their spending. Unlike witch families, they had barely anything left over to give their daughter as allowance during her time at school.

After entering the academy, Lilly had to do various types of work, such as fixing the watches for other girls in the dorm, to earn money. It wasn't disposable income either—it was needed to cover her living expenses.

Appearance was everything for girls in White Birch Dormitory. For example, a Cultural Academy uniform needed to be adjusted in length after several years of use, and no matter how careful the wearer had been, it would inevitably fray and discolor in places. Lilly wore the same uniform as everyone else, but if her clothes were to wear out—a result of her having them tailored cheaply—she'd become the laughingstock of White Birch. To avoid this happening to her, she needed money.

Girls who could afford to carry high-quality pocket watches, sometimes worth more than ten gold coins, were often the subject of envy, even within White Birch. To those girls, such pieces were more like a high-class fashion accessory than a tool for telling the time. But all pocket watches needed regular maintenance—they had to be disassembled, cleaned, and oiled once every two or three years. As such, Lilly had a constant source of work.

However, she'd begun turning down those small maintenance jobs when orders began to flood in from Yuri. The work he gave her was far more profitable.

Lilly looked to her side and saw Sham spacing out with a steaming-hot cup of tea with milk in front of her. She was probably thinking about the charts she'd just been asked to make.

The thought processes going on in Sham's head at that moment were too complicated for anyone to understand; it was something that Lilly knew all too well. Sham looked empty-headed to most people, but she was superhuman when working on her specialized topics. She was a child prodigy, nurtured by Yuri himself.

Unfortunately, that superhuman intelligence of hers proved virtually worthless when faced with the Cultural Academy's curriculum. Most girls in the dorm took Sham for an airhead and knew that she struggled with classes. They considered her below average.

Is he doing it all for her? Lilly wondered.

Yuri didn't seem to have realized how famous he was. Most knew him as the handsome boy with jet-black hair, the one with brawn and even more brains than the top students at the Cultural Academy. Lilly had also heard that there were mysterious circumstances surrounding his peasant mother, and that he'd quickly become Princess Carol's best friend upon entering the academy.

Even in the world of the academy's literature, Yuri had quickly become a popular choice of protagonist.

His fame had quickly led to many rumors.

According to one well-known story, he'd tried the new Kulatish language course, and to this day, he studied it harder than any other student. Despite Kulatish being considered equal in difficulty to a high-level conversation in Ancient Shanish, he'd gained credits for it quickly. Yet, for some reason, he continued to attend the classes.

Kulatish wasn't the sort of course that most boys like him would take interest in. There were rumors that he wasn't just a language expert—he was actually a Kulati sympathizer, which had cast doubt on his character.

A ship made sense. Lilly understood that crossing the ocean was a rational way to escape the evil influences of outsiders.

Their kingdom might someday fall. She realized the danger. What she couldn't imagine was blending in with the Kulati and living among them after her own country was gone. No one could. That was why they didn't try to learn Kulatish.

Lilly had never even considered it.

And yet here Yuri was, learning it. Given how bright he was and how hard he'd been working on it for the past five years, he was sure to have mastered it by now.

This made Lilly wonder—why was Yuri working so hard to secure himself a ship capable of crossing the ocean? If he feared death, he could simply run away by himself without a need for a ship. His intelligence and command of the Kulati language would be enough for him to live within their nations.

If Yuri was so set on securing a ship, it had to be for the sake of saving his family. It was for Sham, his parents, and others precious to him. Lilly couldn't come up with another possible explanation.

But could Yuri go through with it? Lilly still wasn't sure. Carol—the girl who'd introduced Lilly to Sham—wasn't the type who'd abandon her country. And Yuri's father, Rook Ho, would probably stay to fight if the Kulati invaded, because he was the head of his family. Yuri's friend Dolla would also be on the battlefield after graduation.

Could Yuri convince any of these people to run away with him rather than fight? And if they chose not to board his ship, could he abandon those friends to set sail for a new life?

If he was compassionate enough to work tirelessly to save others, could he really leave his loved ones behind so easily?

To Lilly, it all seemed like a contradiction. She wondered if he might have some sort of split personality that allowed him to act without the contradiction holding him back. It would be necessary if he wanted to act on his plan when the crucial moment came.

Another possibility was that Yuri would save those who chose to board his ship—people like Sham and his mother—and then remain in Shiyalta to fight after they'd set sail.

"Lilly? Aren't you going to eat that?"

Lilly suddenly realized that Sham had finished her tea and her desserts already.

Sham's way of thinking about problems was always the same. She'd devote her attention to a single topic, then when she ran out of energy, she'd suddenly come to her senses and begin eating or writing. She must've just run out of steam without Lilly noticing.

Lilly often did something similar herself when she was engrossed in tinkering with some mechanism, but it was never as a result of simply thinking something over.

"Go ahead and have mine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yep."

Lilly moved her dessert plate over to Sham, who began to eat it greedily.

Sham didn't have particularly good table manners, but she still remained elegant in a strange sort of way. It had to be something to do with her noble birth. Just looking at her made Lilly feel happy.

"Is it good?"

"It's delicious."

Lilly suddenly felt lonely. *I'll never get to visit stylish teahouses like this again after graduating, will I?*

There certainly weren't any places like this that served good tea where Lilly was from. Day after day, it would be the same fare of fish, red meat, bread, pickles, and cheese. Luxurious treats made with honey were out of the question.

Lilly absentmindedly spoke her thoughts out loud. "You must be awful happy, Sham."

Sham was lucky.

"Oh...? Yes, I'm happy."

"Yep," Lilly said as she stroked Sham's hair. It was soft and black, just like Yuri's.

"What's wrong?" Sham asked.

“Oh, it’s nothin’.”

“You’re acting weird.”

“Question is, does Yuri plan to take me along with him...?” Lilly asked no one in particular.

Chapter 6 — The Melancholy of Myalo

I was taking a lecture that day.

It was an ordinary course, called Standard Law IV, that was also open to auditors. People who passed it could go on to take this kingdom's equivalent of the bar examination.

The Shiyalta Kingdom didn't have a system of law based on logical reasoning like Japan's, so an absurd number of exceptions and loopholes had to be memorized in order to pass the exam. Still, it was a qualification worth having.

This was a popular course for auditors. The qualification made it possible to defend people in court or during arbitration, and legal experts could easily find work from merchants.

A large proportion of Cultural Academy students took this course, but it wasn't even remotely popular with Knight Academy students. For starters, this system of law only applied within the Royal Territory, making it seem meaningless in chieftain provinces where each head family applied their own laws.

The reality was that chieftain families were neither capable nor motivated enough to make completely new systems of law from scratch. Instead, they copied the Royal Territory's laws wholesale. That made it a useful subject to study—much more so than old languages like Ancient Shanish—so this course, along with history and Kulatish, had caught my interest while choosing optional courses.

Once the lecture was over and I'd closed the booklet of Ho paper that I'd used to take notes, Myalo spoke up from the desk beside mine. "Um, Yuri..."

He'd taken this course along with me, but he was far better at it because memorization was his specialty. I was half expecting him to pass his law exams without needing to do any studying at all. When it came to law, he was always the one helping *me*. (The roles were reversed when it came to subjects like

math.) Myalo seemed anxious today, like he just couldn't relax. At that particular moment, he was making a face I'd never seen before—it was like something was bothering him, but he couldn't bring himself to talk about it.

"What's up?" I asked.

"I've been asked to...deliver a letter."

"To me?"

Myalo placed a single envelope on his desk.

Asking someone to pass a letter along to someone else was an ordinary thing to do in this kingdom. Even so, I'd never been handed a letter by Myalo in all the time I'd known him. That was down to who he was—more specifically, because he was a Gudinveil. People were reluctant to trust him with letters for fear he might read them.

"But...I'm sure you don't want it," Myalo said nervously.

What...? Why wouldn't I?

"Of course I want it."

Are there razor blades and anthrax in there or something? If so, I'll pass.

Myalo reached for the envelope to put it away again. "Let's forget about it."

"But it's for me, right?"

"It is...but since you don't want it, I'll just burn it."

Wait, what's he talking about?

"I can't just ignore a letter someone sent me. Even if it's something pointless, I've got to at least take a look."

My interest had been particularly piqued because Myalo hadn't just shown me a scrap of paper with some bullet points written on it, he had an envelope made from fine parchment. If the letter inside was at all similar, then the combined cost of the envelope, paper, and ink had to be at least ninety ruga. I knew it for a fact because stationery was my field.

"I'm sorry. Let's just pretend I never said anything. This is a mistake. I'm getting you mixed up in my own problems."

Now it sounded serious. If he was trying to make me lose interest, he was going the wrong way about it.

I've got to deal with this now before something terrible happens. When someone as calm as Myalo starts talking like this and looking so serious, I just know something's up.

"You've really got me curious, but I'm not gonna argue. Sounds like I'm better off not seeing it," I lied.

"That's right. My apologies. I should have disposed of it before troubling you like this."

I reached out and tapped Myalo on his far shoulder.

"Yes?"

He instinctively turned to look away from me, giving me a chance to snatch the envelope from his desk.

"Oh. Was that you just now, Yuri?"

When Myalo looked back at me, I'd already opened the envelope and was in the process of removing the letter.

"Yep. You got me," I said while unfolding the parchment.

"Heh. I didn't take you for a prankster."

"You looked so tense I couldn't help myself."

While I was distracting him with the conversation, I looked down and began reading the letter.

"I certainly was tense. But what's that you're reading? A business document?"



“Your letter.”

“Give that back.”

Though I could hear his voice beside me, I couldn't see the expression on his face because I was looking down.

I kept reading as I spoke. “No can do. Sorry, but if you take it from me, I'll nab it back again, even if I have to punch you. This letter is no joke.”

The letter was from his grandmother, Luida Gudinveil. It said that the two of us should meet sometime, and that Myalo's current situation displeased her so much that she might stop paying for his tuition. In other words, it was basically a threat.

“I don't understand most of this letter, but based on your attitude, I'm guessing she told you to deliver it if you wanted your tuition fees paid?” I asked.

“Yes... Exactly that.”

The letter baffled me more than it made me angry. Why would one of the rich families of the seven witches have to stop paying for their child's tuition? It could only be a hollow threat. In fact, it sounded like the sort of thing a parent might use to make their child listen.

There was nothing unusual about that sort of parenting, but seeing how it put fear into someone as smart as Myalo made me feel there was more to this. Myalo hated his family so much that he'd normally refuse to deliver a letter like this one, or maybe even tear it up. That's how I would've expected him to react, anyway.

Instead, he'd brought it to me and then fretted over whether to hand it over or not. The threat of having his tuition money taken away must've actually scared him.

“Well, there's no harm in paying a visit. I suppose I'll drop by tomorrow,” I said.

I had no idea what was making Myalo so worried, but going there to solve the problem myself wasn't too much trouble. I owed my friend that much, after all.

“Please don't go. It's dangerous.”

“Let’s change the subject,” I said while putting the letter in my bag.

“I’m serious,” Myalo said stubbornly.

“Listen, there’s nothing to worry about. We’re done talking about it.”



I’d ignored all of Myalo’s objections after that. I returned briefly to the dorm to drop off my things, then sneaked out and headed for the Ho residence.

Though I’d told Myalo I’d visit his grandmother tomorrow, I planned to go that day. I knew he’d complicate everything by trying to follow me otherwise. Tricking him like this had been my best option.

There was another good reason to head there today too.

“Is that you, young master? It has been a while.”

“Hello, Soim.”

Soim happened to be standing in for one of the residence’s guards so that he could visit his relatives here in the royal capital.

I’d known he was here, but I hadn’t considered dropping by since I had no business with him. Now it was different. He was scheduled to leave tomorrow, so I had to see him today.

“It’s late, I know, but shall we spar again for old time’s sake?” he suggested.

Wow. This old man’s as energetic as ever. Isn’t he about a hundred years old now?

“No thanks. My spear gets plenty of use each morning.”

Spare me, please.

“Oho. The academy must be working you hard,” he said with a laugh.

“Think you could accompany me somewhere today?”

“Accompany you? Has the day finally come when I’ll be able to enjoy a drink with my young master?”

“I got an invitation from the Gudinveil family of the seven witches. I can’t turn it down.”

“Oho...”

Soim raised his hand to stroke his bearded chin. Then he looked at me.

Soim wishes to join your party.

“When someone like me visits a family like that, it feels like venturing into enemy territory. I’d feel safer if you’re with me,” I explained.

“These old bones might not be up to the task, but Soim is always glad to be of service.”

Sounds like he’s on board.

Soim has joined your party!

There was no one more reliable than he was. Never in my life had I met anyone as strong as Soim, not even among the Knight Academy’s instructors.

“Great. Could you leave your spear here and change into a butler’s outfit?”

“Butler’s...outfit?”

“Well, I’m supposedly going there to talk. We can’t show up at the door with our spears and armor.”

“Very well. Regardless, I’ll make short work of witches.”

And that’s why I can count on you.

“I’m sure you will. Let’s get ready to go right now. I want to be back before sunset.”



The Gudinveil head household was built on the edge of an area known as the Witches’ Forest in the northern part of the royal capital. It was where all the seven witches had built their head households, to the effect that the area was fully encircled by their estates. The Witches’ Forest and everything around it was, therefore, owned by the witches. Contrary to what the name might’ve suggested, it wasn’t a green space where commoners could relax—it was private land completely off-limits to outsiders.

After I’d changed out of my uniform, we traveled to the Gudinveil household in a carriage that rattled us around.

The front gate was closed. When we stopped before it, two guards wearing the royal guard's second order uniforms emerged from a side entrance and approached us. The second order was essentially a section of the royal guard that the witch families had under their control.

"This is Gudineil Manor! State your business!" we heard one of the guards demand.

"Young master."

"Soim, keep quiet until I tell you otherwise."

I opened the carriage door so the guards could see me before I spoke.

"I'm Yuri Ho. I was summoned here by the head of the Gudineil family. Check what you need to, but don't keep us waiting outside the gate."

"Yes sir..."

The guard hesitated, as if waiting for me to say more. Perhaps he hadn't been informed of my arrival and wanted to check my letter of invitation, but I wanted to appear as confident as possible. A mob boss would see a humble visitor as easy prey.

"Hurry up! Don't make me wait outside!" I tried to sound irritated as I put more pressure on him.

"One moment, please."

The guard looked annoyed as he headed back inside. He probably didn't enjoy being talked down to by an arrogant brat. But I wasn't here to exchange pleasantries anyway. Since they were going to make life difficult for me regardless, there was no point in showing them any courtesy.

After we alighted from the carriage to wait, a graceful woman appeared to greet us.

"Hello and welcome. I sincerely apologize for the waiting you've endured. Please, come inside."

The front gate rattled as it slid open.

Rather than wearing the uniform of a maid or butler, the woman was dressed

in something like a slim-fitting pantsuit. It was tailored to emphasize her breasts and waistline, but it managed to be beautiful without being provocative. It had to be some of the finest tailoring in the royal capital. A lot of expensive fabric and expertise had gone into making her outfit. It certainly wasn't suited to the dirty work expected of a maid. She must've held some special position, perhaps as a secretary.

We passed through the gate and entered the manor.

"May I take your coat, sir?"

The woman moved behind me and helped me remove my coat. I barely had to move. It came off my back so easily that it unnerved me. She was like some kind of hospitality expert. After she'd handed my coat to a maid, she gestured in the right direction and said, "Now please allow me to guide you to Lady Luida."

Not even chieftain families welcomed their guests as flawlessly as this.

I was impressed by the sights around me as we walked through the manor. Then again, I suppose it shouldn't have been surprising given that this was a witch family home. The Ho family manor was well built too, but we certainly didn't have an oil painting adorning every bit of wall space in every corridor.

I hated to admit it, but it was tasteful. Wooden panels lined the walls up to waist height, and the ceilings above were coated with white mortar that reflected light and brightened up the space. This also helped to bring out the beautiful pictures that decorated the walls.

It had been clear from the exterior that this was a stone building, but there was a warmth to it. Features like aged wooden beams gave the building an old feeling, but it was so immaculately cleaned that the impression was entirely positive. Rather than rickety or worn down, it felt steeped in history and tradition.

When we reached a particular room, the woman in the pantsuit said, "This way please," and opened a door. There was no need to knock before entering the parlor. The woman held the door open and gestured to us to enter. I stepped inside without hesitation.

“Good evening. We finally meet.”

Sitting in a chair in the center of the room was a fairly elderly woman. She looked young compared to Soim, but still more than old enough to have retired. This had to be Luida Gudineil.

I’d heard enough about her to know what to expect, but it still surprised me to see that her kind continued to cling on to power into such advanced old age. Apparently, she had no intention of spending her final years peacefully, even though the money she made in this world couldn’t be carried on to the next. Perhaps her family’s prosperity would be her greatest solace during her final moments.

“Good evening,” I said.

“Sit on that seat there.”

“I wasn’t waiting for your permission to sit down.” I walked right over and sat on the chair opposite her. It was so soft that my body sank right into it.

“Who’s that?” she asked. “A Ho family butler?”

“A servant I brought with me. Forget him.”

What a dull question. Of course I brought a guard.

“Yes, let’s.”

“Well?” I asked.

“Well, what?” she asked in return.

“Well, what did you summon me here for?” I wanted her to get on with it.

“Oh dear. So the Ho family’s heir has no patience.”

“I’d like to be home for dinner.”

My only objective here had been to meet the old woman. Well, mission complete. Sticking around and chatting with her, however, was completely optional.

Since I had no real motivation to stay now, she was going to have to make an effort if she wanted to stop me from leaving.

Myalo's tuition money would be safe now, regardless of when I left. Her order to Myalo couldn't have gone beyond giving me the letter, talking me into the meeting, and making sure I got here. He hadn't actually talked me into it, but his work was done regardless because I was here. There was nothing she could blame him for.

"Oh, I see. But wouldn't you like to dine here?"

"I don't think it'd be wise to dine in the home of a woman who used her own grandchild as a means of threatening me." I hadn't come here for a pleasant chat. There was no point in pretending we were friends.

"Likewise, it would be terribly unwise of me to poison the meal of the Ho family's heir in my own home," she replied.

That was true. Killing me would make her an enemy of the Ho family.

I knew that the only reason that my rapidly growing business hadn't been visited by her thugs yet was because of my family. If she attacked our facilities or used violence against us, there was a risk that I might get caught up in it all and killed in the process. In the worst-case scenario, the Ho family would raise an army and march into the capital.

My family had the power to hold even the most powerful witch family to account, and defusing that situation wouldn't prove easy. So far, the witches limited themselves to indirect harassment to make sure they'd avoid that outcome.

It was unlikely that I'd actually be killed in an attack on our facilities, but it was only natural for the witches to consider all possible outcomes.

"I don't care. I wouldn't enjoy eating here in any case," I told her.

"You prefer eating your meals in the Knight Academy's dining hall with my grandchild, do you?"

This old bag's full of dull questions.

"Of course. Even a meal of bread and salt is enjoyable if eaten with a good friend."

More enjoyable than anything I could eat in this place, anyhow.

“Oh, I see...” When I called Myalo a friend, she reacted as if I’d said something important.

I’m saying too much, aren’t I?

“All I care about is your reason for calling me here. Let’s just hear it.”

“Hmph. Haven’t you guessed?”

“Let’s hear it.”

I didn’t want to share any of my thoughts with someone like her. I was almost sure this was about Ho Company, but there were other possibilities. It could have been about Myalo, or even Carol. Or, even worse...Carla.

“It’s about your business,” she said.

My first guess had been right after all.

“What about it?”

“Join hands with us. We can protect you.”

I almost burst out laughing.

From who? You’ll protect me from more of your kind and expect me to pay for it? It’s high time she cut the crap.

“Protect me?” I said.

“That word has quite a different meaning to a great knight such as yourself, perhaps, but we follow our own set of customs here in the royal capital.”

I knew all too well I wasn’t following them, but the customs she was talking about weren’t something people generally consented to, nor were they demanded by the royal family.

The witches’ wicked practices had become deeply rooted over the course of many years, and now they found it diplomatic to call them “customs.” Doing things their way would mean falling prey to their evil schemes. I wanted nothing to do with it.

“What’ll it cost me?” I asked.

“Going against the—”

"No, I'm asking how much your protection is going to cost."

"You're very direct, aren't you?"

Yeah, because I'm sick of listening to your prattle. I couldn't care less how you prefer to do things.

"Ordinarily, I'd ask for thirty percent of your revenue, but for you, I'm willing to accept twenty percent."

Twenty percent? Don't make me laugh.

If we gave up an extra twenty percent on top of what we already lost in taxes, there'd be nothing left to reinvest in the business. It wasn't reasonable.

"That's out of the question. You call that a *discount*?"

It's stupidity. Who'd pay that much?

"Then what would be reasonable?" she asked.

"Not sure. I didn't come here to haggle."

I was from a chieftain family. If the Ho family's son threw himself down at a witch's feet and begged for her help, there'd be something very wrong with the world. I hadn't had a single intention of making a deal right from the start. I would never yield to her, even if she'd asked for just one percent. I'd only asked out of curiosity. Still, her reply of twenty percent had come as a shock.

"How about this," I said. "I'll give you thirty sheets of Ho paper each month, and you can wipe your ass with them. How's that sound?"

Luida's expression changed. "You've forgotten who you're talking to."

"Have I?"

"Let me tell you, people who go through life with confidence they didn't earn come to regret it dearly."

I had no doubt that many others she'd dealt with had regretted their overconfidence. Harol was probably one of them.

"Is giving dull lectures just a natural part of being old?" I asked.

"What did you say?"

“I know exactly how much confidence I’m worthy of, thanks. I don’t need to hear it from you.”

Deciding my own worth based on others’ opinions was a recipe for low self-esteem. I’d never get anywhere in life.

“Young and reckless, aren’t you?”

“Who’s to say? Maybe I am, or maybe I’ve got the situation all figured out. Why don’t you put me to the test?”

“Perhaps you’re too young to realize it, but what you’re doing—entering the Gudineil household with a single accomplice and treating me with such disrespect—is recklessness without question,” Luida stated before clapping her hands twice.

I heard a door open behind me. No doubt her goons had just appeared to beat up me and my accomplice.

She doesn’t know what she’s getting herself into.

“Soim, handle this,” I said without even turning around.

I heard what sounded like a wooden floorboard breaking, followed by the dull *thud* of someone’s fist against flesh. A gruff, unfamiliar man’s voice cried, “Gah!”

Next, there was the clatter of someone hitting the floor and a lot of breaking furniture.

“This old geezer’s a monster!”

After a few more violent noises and some piercing cries, the room fell silent.

I heard the door again; Soim must’ve decided to close it. That was good thinking. We wouldn’t want anyone to see the state of the room as they walked by.

“Now remind me which one of us is reckless again? My people deal in the art of war. Please don’t tell me you think you can best me with a few thugs you’ve gathered off the streets.”

In a sense, peace had made her careless. She’d forgotten that gang members

were no match for trained soldiers.

“You don’t scare easily, do you?” she said.

“I could say the same of you. I’m impressed.”

Right now, the shoe was on the other foot. But we both knew there was nothing for me to gain by tormenting an old woman in this situation. We had no reason to attack her. Even so, her unflinching attitude was admirable.

“The deal is off. See yourself out.”

“I was already leaving. I would never make a deal with someone petty enough to hold her grandchild’s tuition ransom just to summon me here.”

“You’re awfully hung up on that, aren’t you?”

“Who wouldn’t be? Myalo’s done nothing wrong. The way you use threats is infantile.”

No matter how little witch families cared for their sons, it would be unforgivable for a family with this much money to cut off his access to education by refusing to pay for his tuition.

Graduating from the academy was an absolute necessity for someone who wanted to live as part of this kingdom’s nobility. Unless they graduated from either the Knight Academy or the Cultural Academy, they couldn’t become either a knight or a bureaucrat. They’d be a noble in name only, much like members of custodian families.



Luida had stooped incredibly low to threaten me.

“Exceptional or not, that grandchild of mine means little to me.”

“You were the one who sent Myalo to the Knight Academy in the first place. You can’t just forget that.”

I can’t believe this woman. Even my old man back in Japan didn’t stop my education when I didn’t take the subjects he told me to.

“No, actually, I didn’t. I would *never* have approved.”

What? Myalo had to enter school without permission?

Things made slightly more sense now. I realized that Myalo had rejected the Cultural Academy and entered the Knight Academy of his own free will. He’d done it because he loathed witches, but admired knights. Even so, this was no way for her to treat him.

“It’s not right. You can’t just ruin things for an exceptional student who’s probably going to join the royal guard someday.”

A son of the seven witches was unlikely to be accepted by the chieftain families, which meant that the royal guard was the next best choice. Still, that was no problem. It was a respectable career that wouldn’t bring shame on any witch family. He could even become a useful asset if he were to climb the ranks. There was no reason for his grandmother to object.

“What are you talking about? The royal guard belongs to the Cursefits. We’ve no place there.”

Ahh. So that’s the situation. But she’s talking about the second order. There shouldn’t be anything stopping him from joining the real first order.

“I know you see him as an unwanted child, but I’m not asking you to show him love—just have some compassion for your own grandson and let him graduate from the school of his choice.”

“What? What grandson?”

“The only reason you mistreat Myalo like this is because he’s a boy, isn’t it? How can you be so petty and so small minded?”

Things would be so different if he were a girl. What a stupid family this is.

“You can’t—pffft. Bwa ha ha. Ha ha ha!” Luida suddenly began roaring with laughter. “Aha ha ha...”

What’s with her? What’d I say to set that off? I don’t get it. Where’s the joke?

“You honestly think she’s a boy?!”

Huh...?

“She’s been a girl since the day she was born! You thought she was a boy! Aha ha ha! I knew there had to be *some* sort of misunderstanding between us, but this is too much!”

Uhhh? What? Huh? Myalo’s...a girl? No, no, no. I know he’s a boy. I need to stop getting distracted. I’m supposed to avoid getting caught up on the little things. I can’t let her lead the conversation. First thing to do is get out of here. I can think this over later.

“Whatever. I’m done talking. If Myalo’s tuition is safe, then I’m going home.”

“Ah ha ha... Fine, go. But when did I say I’d pay her tuition?”

Oh, come on... How can she be so unreasonable? She’s driving me mad.

“Fine. It’s my gain and your loss.”

“How so?”

“Myalo will give up the Gudinveil name in order to remain at the academy. Then he can become my brother.”

“Oh?” My comment was so unexpected that Luida forgot what was making her laugh and knitted her brow.

I had her.

“My father will agree to adopt Myalo. As for his tuition, I can afford it myself. And I’m sure Myalo will like the arrangement.”

“You’re serious?”

“If you’re going to be cruel enough to cut him off and make him drop out, then it’s a reasonable reaction.”

It was a genuine possibility. And if she was heartless enough to follow through with her threat, despite it being a pathetically small sum to someone with her wealth, then she probably wouldn't care when he ceased to be her grandson anyway.

"I'll be leaving now."

I stood up and turned around for the first time, only to see Soim standing over a heap of four unconscious, muscular men.

Yikes. Good thing I brought the old man.



I retrieved my coat at the entrance and boarded the carriage outside the manor. Soim remained outside, refusing to get on or let his guard down just yet.

The woman in the pantsuit who'd welcomed us in didn't appear to see us out. I wondered what had happened to her.

"Get moving," I told the coachman. "Soim will get in once we're off the manor's grounds."

"Yes, sir," the coachman said a little nervously.

When he cracked his whip, the horse began to pull the carriage.

We trotted at a slow pace as we passed through the open gate. Finally, Soim, who'd been guarding the rear, gave one last butler-like bow before jumping aboard. The moment he was inside, a hard crack of the whip got the carriage moving at a considerable speed.

"Our visit is over already? I'm almost sad to leave." Soim looked like a little boy disappointed to see his day out come to an end.

"That wasn't enough for you?"

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that, but it was invigorating to have my blood pumping again. I'm somewhat reluctant to let it end. When hot blood courses through my veins, why, it's enough to make me feel young once more."

Soim appeared completely calm, but there was a fire in his eyes. The experience must've had a good effect on him. If it improved his circulation and

prevented him from going senile, we'd killed two birds with one stone this evening.

"Glad to hear it. You saved me back there."

"Hah. It sounds like there's some dispute over your school friend. Rest assured, I shan't breathe a word to Lord Rook."

Soim knew nothing about Myalo.

"I'm not hiding anything. There's nothing to be ashamed of. Then again, dad *might* give an angry lecture about how reckless I was to enter a witch's manor with only you as backup."

"That may be, but... Hah... Bold deeds such as these can only increase your renown. Nothing can threaten your standing as a knight."

Maybe not, but that won't stop him from lecturing me over it.

"You have impressed Soim with your steadfast spirit, young master," he continued.

"Only because I had you behind me. I knew Soim Hao wouldn't have trouble with a witch's minions."

I wondered how many he could've taken on at once. I couldn't imagine him losing, even if she'd called in a hundred of them.

After all, I'd once seen Soim take down the biggest, brawniest bodybuilder with a single blow back in the dojo at Ho Manor. His hand had disappeared into the man's stomach, causing him to collapse. When the man's clothes had been peeled back, dark blood oozed from finger-shaped holes in his well-defined abdominal muscles. Soim had explained something about gaps between muscles, but I'd found it a little hard to look at.

"Hah... You were certainly bold when you chose to set foot into the enemy's lair."

"Was I? I guess you're right."

Entering the manor hadn't been a decision I'd taken lightly.

"She concealed it well, but even that great witch must've been gripped by

fear. It all played out beautifully.”

Soim felt satisfied after all he’d seen; meanwhile, I felt shaken.

Myalo can’t be a... But why would Luida lie about it...?

“Call upon me when you plan your next outing. Soim is always at your beck and call.”

“Will do. Looks like it’s good for your health.”

I wanted him to live a long life.

“Hah, that’s true. If this could become a daily affair, I might forget that I’ve aged at all.”

I don’t think I could handle outings like this every night.

After we’d returned to the residence, I parted with Soim and headed back to the dorm where Myalo was waiting.

Chapter 7 — Carol's Adventure

I

It was dark by the time I reached the dorm.

There were students in the lobby discussing their plans for their time off the following day. I combed through the lobby, moving between the tables and sofas in search of my friend, but Myalo was nowhere to be seen. I even checked his room. No such luck.

I hadn't eaten anything since lunch, so I gave in to my hunger and got some cold food in the dining hall before I went back to my room.

Inside, I found Carol sitting cross-legged on her bed. She was reading a book that was open on the bed sheet.

Carol looked up when she heard me enter. "You're back late. What were you doing?"

"Had business to take care of."

Carol must've planned to spend the night in the dorm. Apparently, she didn't like going back to the royal castle because an old woman there was constantly nagging her about proper manners. She had another room in White Birch Dormitory, but interacting with the students there was complex and tiring, so in the end, she felt most comfortable here at the Knight Academy.

"Business? Was it about Myalo?" she asked.

"How'd you know?"

Can you read minds?

"There was someone I'd never seen before near the dorm entrance a little while ago. She was asking for Myalo. I'd never seen Myalo look so scared."

Ah... I must've just missed her.

“What did she look like?”

“I only got a brief glimpse from the terrace, but she was dressed like a top servant from a seven witches family. The Gudinveils must have sent her.”

It sounded like the woman who’d showed us in—the one who looked like she was a high-ranking servant.

“Anyhow, all the business surrounding Myalo is finished,” I said.

“What happened?” Carol asked.

“I can’t talk about it, but it’s all settled. Nothing’s going to change. All’s right with the world.”

In truth, there was a good chance they’d take revenge on my company, but there was no avoiding that. I was used to constant trouble in any case.

“Well, that’s good,” Carol said without trying to pry.

“Speaking of Myalo...” I said, “I was just thinking, isn’t he a little small and feminine? Imagine if it turned out he was actually a girl... Ha ha...” I’d done my best to sound casual, though it came out anything but.

Well, I screwed that up.

“Wow, you finally realized.”

“But...”

“Heh. You were pretty much the only one who hadn’t figured it out, but you got there in the end. I guess even you miss the obvious sometimes. Ha ha.”

The moron was enjoying this.

“Don’t tell me you knew from the start?”

“I realized soon after starting school. We’re the only girls in the dorm, after all. We help each other out at times.”

You’re kidding me. This can’t be right.

“In fact, I think most people figured it out pretty quick. I mean, it’s obvious just looking at her that she’s not a boy.” Carol wasn’t going easy on me.

“Gah...” I had no comeback.

I feel awful. I always tell everyone we're good friends, but I missed something so basic.

"Are you free tomorrow?" Carol asked without warning.

What's this all of a sudden?

"Not all day, but...my schedule's not exactly full."

"In that case, wanna go somewhere with me?"

"Oh? Another summons from the royal castle?"

"Nothing like that. I'm almost an adult. I want to see how ordinary people live."

Huh...? Now what's she talking about?

"I thought, why not disguise myself and explore the city?" Carol said.

"Do I need to remind you about what happened to us five years ago?"

This princess sure forgets easily.

"I know. It won't be as dangerous as last time if I'm properly prepared, will it? We're both bigger than we were back then, and we're thoroughly trained. Thugs like those won't be a match for us anymore."

"All right, but did you forget what you look like? You'll stand out from a mile away, no matter what disguise you wear."

With her blonde hair and blue eyes, Carol stood out more than anyone.

There wasn't any sort of magic spell to prevent others from having the same physical traits as her, but the royal family had carefully controlled their bloodline to make it common among them. Since the witch families carried a lot of royal blood, a blonde child would sometimes be born to them too. Apparently, an ancestor of the Enfillet family—one of the greater of the seven witches—had blonde hair and blue eyes despite not being royalty; that was due to their father being born to a great-grandmother of Queen Shimoné's.

Still, it was a trait so rare, even among the witch families, that someone with blonde hair and blue eyes would never crop up at random in the city. In all the time I'd spent walking around the royal capital, I must've seen over ten

thousand people, and not one of them had looked like that. According to Lilly, the two princesses were currently the only blonde students in White Birch Dormitory.

“I’m not that stupid. I’ve thought about it already, and I’ve got a solution.”

Carol pulled out something brown—I thought it was some sort of long-haired rodent at first—and placed it on the bed beside her. It was a wig.

“What do you think? Looks good, right? I found out about these accessories a little while back. Getting hold of one wasn’t easy.”

“Where’d you find it?”

“So, there was a girl at White Birch who accidentally burned her hair on a candle. Luckily, she wasn’t badly injured. Then, the next day, her hair had suddenly grown back longer! When I asked her how, that’s when I learned about wigs. I asked Myalo to buy one for me and be discreet about it.”

An order from the royal castle would’ve aroused some suspicion. People would’ve wanted to know what she was planning to do with a wig. Carol had grown crafty enough to foresee that much.

“I paid her handsomely for the trouble, of course.”

“Let’s see it on you,” I urged her.

“Sure.”

Carol put a sort of net on her head and stuffed all of her hair into it. The fiber was interesting. I had no idea what it was made of, but it had a little elasticity and didn’t lose its shape as easily as ordinary thread. If I had to guess, maybe it was made from whalebone.

The top of her head looked remarkably round as she put the wig over the top. Once it was on her, I noticed that the bangs were a little longer than usual—they extended down to her eyes. That would do a lot to hide the blue color. Her head looked a little bigger because of all the hair she’d hidden away, but it was otherwise believable.

Myalo, being smart, must’ve put some real thought into the design.

“I see. Not bad,” I said.

"I know, right? I'll be counting on you tomorrow."

Hold on a second.

"I didn't agree yet. Where do you want to go? Did a shop catch your interest?"

"To the poor districts."

"You idiot."

What's gotten into that golden head of hers? Is it stuffed with leaves?

"Haven't you got a brain? That's no place to go for fun."

"I'm gonna be this kingdom's queen, aren't I?"

That was an unexpected turn in the conversation.

Her little sister's such an airhead that we'll have to settle for a queen with a head stuffed with leaves, won't we?

"It's embarrassing being heir to the throne when I don't even know anything about the city I'm supposed to rule from."

Ah...

"Well... Okay, I get that."

Her reason was more sensible than I'd expected.

"Right? I've never seen how poor people live. I don't have a clue about how to help them, or if they even *need* my help. I can't just trust whatever witches tell me, can I?"

"It's impressive that you're thinking about people like that."

"So you're coming, then?"

"Ugh..."

I had some doubts that stopped me from agreeing immediately. I needed a minute to think. Eventually, I concluded that I could handle it.

"All right, fine. But you have to do what I tell you."

"Really?!"

“Yeah. A knight’s true to his word.”

“This is great! We’d better get some sleep for tomorrow.”

To my amazement, she got into bed—right there and then—and quickly fell asleep.

I considered doing the same, but decided I’d take a bath first.

God knows what’ll happen if she’s around. If we get captured again, it might be three days before we can escape. I dread to think.

II

“Hey! Wake! Up! It’s morning!”

As consciousness slowly returned to me, I could hear Carol’s voice and feel myself being jostled around.

“Mh...?”

I managed to open my eyes, but my body felt heavy and demanded that I go back to sleep.

“Morning? Uh...”

I dragged myself out of bed. Yesterday’s events must’ve taken their toll on me.

Hm...?

I looked out the window and noticed it was still a little dark outside.

“It’s way too early to get up,” I protested. “I’ve got nothing to do until noon...”

What did I have to do today...? Oh, wait—I agreed to explore the city with Carol today.

“It’s morning,” Carol said. “Breakfast’s already being served. Let’s go.”

Why does she get up so early? She’s like an old woman...

Carol’s eyes were sparkling, and she was full of energy. Given how alert she was, I doubted she’d feel tired again until the following night. There was no way

she'd let me go back to sleep.

"Guess I'll get up..."

"Good."

When we went downstairs to get breakfast, I was unsurprised to find barely anyone there. But she was right that food was being served. On weekdays, there were bells to wake us up. That wasn't the case on our days off, so most students—me included—preferred to sleep in late.

A woman greeted us as we went to get our food. "Morning."

"Morning," Carol replied, loud and clear.

"Good morning," I said sluggishly.

"I'd like a double serving of bread today," Carol said.

How can she be that hungry at this hour?

"I'll just have the usual," I said.

"A ham and cheese sandwich with milk, isn't it?" the woman asked.

"You sure love that stuff," Carol said.

"Dairy's good for you," I told her.

Bread was generally eaten with a coating of salted butter in this kingdom, but it would have been a waste not to build up some muscle while I was training during my growing phase. Without the cheese, it wouldn't contain enough protein. Plus, if I asked while the stove was hot, I could get my cheese sandwich toasted. Nothing in this world tasted better than a freshly toasted cheese sandwich.

After a short wait, the woman passed trays of food to me and Carol. "Here you go."

"Thanks!" Carol said.

"Thank you," I said.

Carol and I carried our trays away and sat together at a table where we started eating.

Carol began taking bites out of some bread soaked with butter. There certainly wasn't anything wrong with her appetite.

I could still remember her eating like a well-raised little lady when she first moved into the dorm. She'd cut her bread into little pieces before buttering and eating them. With time, those little pieces gradually got bigger. She still didn't try to eat the bread whole, but the pieces she cut off these days were big enough that I was surprised she could stuff them into her small mouth.

Carol was finished eating in no time. "Okay, that's breakfast done. Let's go."

"That was quick. I'm still eating." I was still feeling tired. Each bite was a struggle against my heavy eyes.

"Uh... Fine. I'll let you set the pace today."

"Why are you in such a rush?"

"Who doesn't rush when they're looking forward to something?"

"You're looking forward to this...? We're not heading out to play."

After we'd washed our faces and returned to our room, I suggested, "Wanna head out now?"

"Yep, let's do it."

Carol began trying to stuff her hair into the net she'd shown me the day before.

"Hold on."

"What?"

"You're putting your disguise on before we've left the dorm? If anyone sees us, I'll have to explain why I'm taking random girls back to my room."

"Ah... R-Right. Now what?" Carol had no idea what to do. She hadn't thought this far ahead.

"Why don't you get your disguise ready here, then change into it in an empty classroom before we head out of the academy?"

"Oh... All right. Good idea. Let's do that."

Carol took out her bag. It was made of fine leather, and some sort of pressing process had been used to emboss the royal crest on its surface. Everything about it was exquisite.

“No, use this.” I gave her a bag I’d brought with me to the dorm.

“Hm? Why? What’s wrong with mine?”

“It’s got a great big royal crest on it, so it’ll look like you stole it from the royal castle, won’t it?”

That might’ve been the very reason they put the royal crest on things. A thief might remove embroidery, but the embossing was permanent.

“Oh, that? Okay, I’ll let you make the decisions.” Carol began packing the pieces of her disguise into my bag. She carefully folded up the items of clothing first.

When it came to handling her belongings, she was very neat and proper. The same went for her tea making. It was like her royal education had been focused on all the wrong places.

“All right, let’s get moving,” Carol said.

“All right.”

I left the dorm feeling a little anxious about what I was getting myself into.



“Hmm...”

“What? Something wrong?”

When Carol stepped out of the empty classroom, even I had to admit that she looked beautiful enough to fit in at any high-class event. There was no fixing that, but her clothes were way too fancy.

Carol had chosen a simple outfit of a shirt and skirt. The problem was that the shirt was made of fine glossy fibers that resembled silk. An incredibly intricate embroidery had been painstakingly sewn across its entire surface.

The skirt looked like a normal flared skirt, but it also had delicate silver embroidery around the hem. I could tell from its shape that a skilled tailor had

made it for Carol specifically.

It was a tasteful choice of outfit, but it would be dangerous to stray too far from the royal castle with it on. She'd probably just picked out some of her everyday clothes, unaware that they'd make her stand out like a thoroughbred in a herd of mules.

"I know a good store where I often buy my clothes. Let's head there first so you can change out of those."

We'd be able to walk there because it was near the academy, and not too far from the Ho residence either. It was in a safe area where we wouldn't have to worry about being attacked.

She seemed genuinely surprised by my suggestion. "But what's wrong with these?"

"Look at what I'm wearing. See the difference?"

I was wearing the ragged type of clothes that a craftsman's son might wear. I always kept an outfit like this in the dorm because I had to pass through poor districts to get to the waterwheel where I worked. Your average person wouldn't consider my clothes too shabby, but they were as different from Carol's clothes as a gem and a lump of coal.

"We're not going to a castle banquet. When you're heading to a commoner district, you wear commoner clothes."

"Oh, right... Lead the way to the tailor, then."

I pounded on the tailor's door. It was still too early to be open for business, but I wasn't going to give up.

Bam, bam, bam! Bam, bam, bam!

With some persistence, I finally got a response. "Stop that racket! We're closed!"

They won't let me in;

Still, I continue to knock

At the store's front door.

Someone had to answer eventually. Finally, a young man of about twenty eventually came out—the owner’s son.

He took a look at me and said, “Oh, it’s you.”

I was a familiar face because I’d shopped there many times.

“Sorry, but it’s urgent. Could you give her some clothes?”

“Ooh?”

The man frowned at Carol at first, but then his eyes went so wide it looked like they might pop out of his head.

“But this... Where did... Th-This is unbelievable!”

Something was getting him excited. He moved closer to Carol and started examining her clothes so closely that he looked like he was trying to smell her. It must’ve been the fine tailoring that caught his attention.

“Well now, well now, come on in!”

I’d expected him to argue that it was still too early, but instead we were welcomed inside. I imagined he felt like an art gallery curator greeting a visitor who’d brought along the Mona Lisa.

“What’s up with this guy?” Carol looked at the tailor’s son like he was a piece of trash at her feet.

Chances were that no one had stared at Carol with so little courtesy since the day she was born. It was her attire—rather than her body—that he was interested in, but that didn’t make her feel any more comfortable.

“He likes clothes, that’s all. Don’t be mad.”

“Are you sure...?”

“We can handle him if he tries anything. Go on in.”

Carol and I were both carrying daggers, so I wasn’t even remotely afraid of entering the tailor’s store. Carol must’ve shared my confidence, because she stepped inside. I followed after, closing the door behind us.

“This is haute couture by Le Tasha, a purveyor to the royal family... C-Can I touch it?”

The freak kept looking at Carol's outfit up and down from neck to toe, but he'd managed to glean a lot just by that. Le Tasha must've been a famous brand.

"No, you can't touch them while there's something in them," I reprimanded him.

He'd basically be molesting her if he did that. And no one would buy it if he claimed he was just trying to feel her clothes.

"Something in them? You mean me...?" Carol asked angrily.

I ignored her.

"Just pick out some clothes for her," I told the man.

"For her...? I'm afraid we can't offer anything that compares to what she's already wearing."

"Give her something like what I've got on."

"No...I couldn't. No one wears clothes like yours out of choice."

Carol's noble attire clearly held some sort of special significance to him.

"We're headed downtown. She's bound to get mugged if she's dressed like that. And what if her clothes get torn?"

"We can't have that," he agreed.

"Then fetch her something else. And hop to it."

"All right..." He disappeared into the back of the store.

"Why's he like that?" Carol didn't know what to make of him, as if he was unlike anyone she'd ever met.

"He's a tailor, so he likes clothes. Yours are the kind of thing a middle-class worker might never see in their life."

Carol hadn't even realized. "Huh? Really?"

"It's not you that he's interested in. Don't worry."

"I'll take your word for it."

It wasn't long before he came back. "How about these?"

He'd brought us some clothes that looked appropriate for a merchant's daughter. They had embroidery, but it had been done with cheap-looking, ordinary-colored thread. The raised parts of the embroidery also looked a little frayed. They still might've been just a *little* too high-class for where we were going, but they were passable. We wouldn't be wandering around at night, after all.

"They'll do. Will this cover it?" I took out four silver coins and put them down before him.

"Generous as ever, I see."

"We made you open up the store early. The extra's for your trouble."

"Will she put them on here?"

"Of course."

I took the top and bottoms and thrust them at Carol.

"You want me to wear these?"

"Yeah, please do."

"Um... Where can I change?"

She was looking all around us even though there were changing rooms right in front of us. It struck me as weird at first, but then I realized that she had never visited a place like this before. Places like Le Tasha probably had changing rooms of their own, but since Carol was measured for every outfit, the staff must've visited the royal castle for the purpose.

"Go in there, close the curtain, and then change," I said, pointing to a changing room.

"But..." She was at a loss for words. "F-Fine. If that's how it works."

Yes, that's how it works.

Carol entered without saying anything more.

"We need a hat too," I said.

The wig was actually *too* high-quality. The only girls downtown with hair as beautiful as that were in...specific lines of work. It just wouldn't look right.

“Very well. And would she like to trade in her old clothes?”

“You know damn well she wouldn’t.”

If there’s a seedy underground market for princesses’ unwashed clothes, I want no part.

“Oh... All right... There isn’t enough money here in the store anyway. You can help yourselves to one of the hats over there.”

He pointed over to a bunch of hats hung on a stand.

While I was looking for a good one, I heard the changing room curtain slide open.

That was quick.

“Does this look okay?” Carol asked as she stepped out.

“Looks fine to me,” I replied.

They looked about right, though her back was still too straight to pass for a downtown girl.

The clothes Carol had been wearing were lying near her feet in the changing room.

“You’re taking the clothes with you, aren’t you?” the man asked. “I’ll fold them so they aren’t damaged.”

He picked Carol’s clothes up off the floor and carried them to a table. His ulterior motive was obvious, but I let him do his thing since he wasn’t handling her underwear or drooling over them like a pervert. If anything, he simply displayed pure-hearted admiration for the tailoring.

Carol didn’t seem the least bit bothered by the fact that someone else was handling her freshly removed, still-warm clothing. She might not have even realized that that sort of perversion existed.

I decided to forget about him while I chose a hat.

I picked up something that looked reasonable enough from the stand and passed it to Carol. “Try this on.”

“Okay.” She placed it firmly on her head.

I'd given her a man's hat because of how big the wig made her head, and it was a perfect fit.

Meanwhile, the tailor's son was folding up Carol's clothes ever so slowly, like they were a lover he couldn't bear to part with.

He's unbelievable...

I grabbed them from him the moment they were folded and stuffed them into my bag.

"Ah..."

"See you."

I took Carol by the hand and dragged her away.



After leaving Carol's original outfit at the Ho residence, I packed a few things that might be useful for self-defense in a bag, tied it across my shoulder, and then met back up with Carol. She was waiting outside the front gate.

"All right, let's go. This way."

"It was four silvers, right? Let me pay." Carol handed me a few coins that she'd brought.

"Oh, okay. I wouldn't have minded paying, though."

I took the money since it made no sense for me to buy her clothes, but I started wishing I'd haggled on the price a little for her sake. Then again, if either of us was rich, it was definitely her.

"I suppose you can just take as much money as you like from the castle?"

"As if. I saved up some of my all-purpose money."

All-purpose money?

"You mean princesses get an allowance too?"

"Pretty much. If I ask for things like clothes and paper, or anything I need for studying, I get it right away. Still, I need cash sometimes. It means I can buy things from stores or pay someone to run out and fetch something when I need

it quick. I have a budget for that stuff.”

“Makes sense. Sounds awkward though.”

So she’s been building up a stash over time? I can admire that.

“Now, where did you want to go?” I asked.

“I told you, didn’t I? The poor districts. I wanna see the absolute worst parts of Sibiak.”

Should’ve known she wouldn’t change her mind...

“The absolute worst...” I echoed.

The capital didn’t exactly have slums, but there were two areas where the poorest people tended to live. One area was to the northwest, and another was to the southwest.

The western regions weren’t very safe, in general, but poor people tended to gather there in search of low rent. What made those areas cheap was the distance from the two major economic centers of the capital: the Great Bridge, and the areas surrounding Royal Castle Island.

There were two ways to cross the river that divided Sibiak into northern and southern halves—one was the Royal Castle Island bridge, and the other was the Great Bridge. Royal Castle Island’s bridge was always guarded, and commoners weren’t allowed on the island. For most people, the only option was to use the Great Bridge located even farther to the east than the royal castle.

As a result, people living on the west side of Sibiak found it difficult to travel between the north and south sides of the city. Essentially, the two poor regions had been completely overlooked when it came to the flow of goods.

The two western areas weren’t equal, however. The southwest area had slightly more expensive homes and less crime than the northwest. That was down to the quality of the land around the city’s outskirts. To the north, an expanse of barren soil formed a wasteland. The other region had suitable grazing ground that spread out, perhaps due to the way sediment was deposited with the flow of the river. Regardless, this meant more farming work was available there.

I was more familiar with the latter area, largely because I passed through it to access my waterwheel.

“I’m not an expert on the poor districts or anything, but I’ll show you around what I know.”

Homeless people were an increasingly common sight in the royal capital as of late. Most were sleeping on mats and blankets that covered the cobbles, though some had animal furs that they’d kept with them when leaving their former homes. Most left a bowl by the roadside so that they could beg while they slept.

I’d even seen bodies in the streets of the capital. In winter, the homeless would freeze to death at the roadside where they lay. Though the southern poor district wasn’t as bad as the north’s, corpses still appeared here from time to time. There were no systems in this kingdom to provide for those incapable of making the money they needed to live. No job simply meant no money, which meant none of the necessities needed to live. Starvation and hypothermia were often all that awaited the unemployed.

“How did these people get like this?” Carol asked while looking at the dirty, bundled-up vagrants.

None of them looked well. Although they didn’t have to fear freezing to death since it wasn’t winter yet, it was impossible to be healthy when they were hungry and left to spend each night on hard cobbles. There was no hope in their eyes as they watched us pass by.

I saw people like these every day, but to Carol it was more awful than anything she’d imagined.

“Who knows,” I replied.

“Don’t you care?”

“Just think about it. It’s not hard to figure out. They’ve got no jobs. Most people on the streets are Kilhinans.”

The city was already overpopulated, but more kept coming. With no more work to go around, they were bound to be left jobless.

Those that were strong, smart, and willing to get their hands dirty could make their living through shady means, like the gang that had kidnapped Carol and me some years ago. Such groups often operated independently from the witches. Instead, the witches treated them as rival gangs, and were just as troubled by them as everyone else in this city.

Someone who wasn't cut out for crime and couldn't find an honest job would be left to freeze by the roadside.

"They might have been Kilhinans, but they're our people now," Carol argued.

"Maybe they are. Maybe I should call them Shiyaltans. It's not the label that's the problem."

"That's not what I mean... Why are we letting our own people live in poverty like this?"

"Who knows."

I had several ideas as to *why* it was happening, but I didn't want to start making accusations. I kept quiet.

"You're a noble. Don't you think you should do something?" Carol asked.

That made no sense. Carol was blaming me as if it was nothing to do with her.

"We're not in Ho Province," I replied. "You won't see anything like this in Kalakumo."

"So you think you're not responsible at all?"

"It's not my problem to fix," I said bluntly.

"Yes, it is. It's a noble's responsibility to make sure common people don't suffer this way."

I had no idea where she'd gotten that notion in her head.

"Assuming I should do something, what exactly am I *supposed* to do?" I asked.

"Huh...? There's a bunch of ways to help these people. We could give them food, homes..."

"Idiot."

Carol had no idea, though I knew I couldn't judge her too harshly given her sheltered upbringing and sanitized education.

"You're not getting away with calling me an idiot." Carol came to a stop and glared at me.

"Then tell me: if I'm supposed to help these people, what should I do?"

"Well... Just help them."

It's not that easy.

"You're okay with me running this place my way, then?"

"Your way?"

"The royal capital's ruled by your family. If you want me to take charge and save these people, then give me authority over it."

"You know I can't."

Of course she couldn't. Authority was a broad concept, but it was a noble's lifeblood, carefully handed down from one generation to the next.

"Then how can I be responsible for these people? I can't stamp out criminal gangs outside my jurisdiction, and since I can't collect taxes, I can't transfer money from the rich to the poor."

If I couldn't do those things, I couldn't help. In this city, these powers generally belonged to witch families.

"Those are the powers that rulers use to guide their people to a better situation. If anyone should feel responsible for the state of things here, it's whoever's in charge—*your* family, in other words. Why should I feel responsible? I'm a member of the Ho Family."

Carol didn't have a response.

"Or, what? Do you think I can save everyone by handing out the coins in my purse to these beggars? Or maybe you think the Ho family's knights should storm in and take control of the city, so we can take charge of the people here?"

Getting to the root of the problem would mean changing the system, and

thus coming into conflict with whoever held power. Anything less would be a bandaid. But a conflict like that would inevitably lead to a war. In effect, this meant that nobles from outside couldn't do anything now, or ever. Everything was in the hands of the royal family.

"But..." Carol fell quiet, as if my words left her feeling guilty. She hung her head low. "Sorry... It's my fault."

It was rare to see her completely admit blame.

Her apology just made me feel bad. I was surprised at myself for getting so heated.

The royal family wasn't free from blame, but it wasn't fair to hold them solely responsible for the state of the poor districts either. They did give out enough money to fund feeding programs for everyone, and the poor weren't always left to their own devices—money was collected from the rich via tax and then redistributed. The reason that none of this made much of a difference in practice was because witches were always there skimming off the top.

I had a good idea of what was going on here, but I didn't want to say too much to Carol. Rather than getting all her answers from me, I wanted her to form her own suspicions, investigate, and then draw her own conclusions.

"If you really want to help people, there is one thing we can do."

"What's that?"

Losing the argument against me had left Carol looking deflated, and her voice sounded weak. I tried not to feel too guilty. We hadn't come here for fun, after all.

"Stores are about to open," I said.

"You're going to give out food?"

"Something like that. This is how I take responsibility."

I walked toward a nearby stall which was selling things that looked like fresh sausages in bread—hot dogs, in other words. People heading to work early in the morning could buy them for breakfast.

"Are you open?" I asked as we approached.

“Welcome. What’ll it be?” the owner replied.

Like all the stall owners in this area, this one was a big man who looked like he’d be good in a fight.

“Got anything besides that meat you’re roasting?”

“It’s not freshly baked, but we’ve got meat pie.”

Exactly what I’m after.

“Could you give me a whole pie?”

“You got it. If I’ve sold a whole pie already, I must be in for a good day,” he said cheerfully.

A skilled merchant could make a good living even in a place like this. Someone as big as this guy wasn’t a natural target for thieves either.

It didn’t take him long to wrap up the food since it was already baked. I paid, thanked him for it, and then left the stall.

“You’re giving it to someone? You can’t give out money?” Carol studied the pie I was holding as we walked away.

I wasn’t planning on giving it to a beggar.

“You’ll see.”

I approached a fully clothed man who was sleeping at the roadside.

“He’s the one. I’m gonna let him have it.”

“This man...? Why?”

Carol was searching for the words. I didn’t know what she wanted to say, but she was hesitating to say it in front of him. I wouldn’t have blamed her if she’d seen him sleeping on the bare cobbles and thought, *What’s so special about this roadside trash?*

“Watch. He’ll cry with happiness when I give him this pie.”

“Well, yeah. He’s sleeping on the street...”

“Here goes.”

Without warning, I kicked the man hard in the stomach.

“Ugh! *Ngh!*” I’d used so much force that he was left rolling around holding his abdomen.

Looks like I got him real good. Nice.

“Hey! What’re you doing?!” Carol, horrified, grabbed me by the shoulder.

“Just watch.”

“Cut it out!” Carol cried. “Why would you do that?!”

Meanwhile, the man’s pain had subsided to the point where he could get up.

“What was that for, you bastard?!” he cried, approaching like he was going to grab me.

He was a healthy-looking man, probably in his late twenties.

Yep, he’s the one. I remember him.

He was someone I knew.

“I’ll ask the questions, dumbass,” I told him.

“Oh, it’s you, Mister Chairman.”

“Huh?” Carol was stunned.

“What’s wrong with the room I gave you?” I asked. “What are you sleeping on the ground for?”

I was genuinely angry with him. Kicking him had made me feel a little better, but I wasn’t fully satisfied yet.

“Uh... That’s... Huh? I must’ve gotten drunk and passed out.”

I can see that. I didn’t ask for a lame excuse.

“You rat...” I spat. “What was it you told me a week ago? That your wife and kid were on the streets. That you’d work until you dropped dead. They were all lies, weren’t they?”

“N-Not at all! It was all true!”

“Then why were you sleeping on the ground? Do you know how easily someone could’ve killed you out here?”

Even I tried to avoid walking through here at night. When we shipped out paper, we had guards armed with spears to escort it through this place. He was lucky to be in one piece after getting drunk and falling asleep somewhere so dangerous. If all he'd lost was his purse, he'd gotten off lightly.

"Y-Yeah, but..."

Okay, I get it. He was so drunk yesterday that he can't remember anything.

"Let me guess, you got carried away drinking since you knew you had no work the next day, right? So carried away that you lost your memory, in fact. It wasn't long ago you were crying over how hungry your kid was, but now look at you. Who'll feed your family if you die?"

"But I... I've shamed myself..."

Never mind your shame. Jeez, this one's a real manipulator. Just a week ago we had that emotional interview, and now this. Just how easily can he turn on the waterworks? I felt like an idiot for ever taking pity on him.

"Forget it..." I sighed.

"Mister Chairman... Please...don't fire me! Please! Anything but that!" He hung his head so low he was practically groveling at my feet.

"Are your wife and kid waiting for you back home?"

"Y-Yes... I hope so."

"Your wife'll be mad at you for being gone all night, won't she?"

Just when he's gotten himself a steady job, he goes off drinking and doesn't come home. I'll be surprised if she's not livid. At least keep it together for three weeks. What's wrong with you?

"She might be, yeah..."

Spare me the puppy dog eyes... This guy's hopeless.

"The best way a man can make it up to his wife when he comes home late is to have a gift and an apology ready."

I thrust the pie I'd just bought at him.

"Take this and get yourself home."

“Huh?”

“Eat it with your family.”

The man accepted the pie with trembling hands. “Th-Th-Tha... Tha...”

There he goes, tearing up again.

“Th-Thanks... Thank you, Mister Chairman.”

“Run on home,” I said, shooing him away with my hand.

The man went running off.

“See that? I just saved a whole family from collapse,” I said proudly.

“Was that one of your employees?” Carol asked.

“Yeah. Did it surprise you?”

“Yeah, it did...”

“All of my employees live around this area.”

Workers here came cheap. If they sounded motivated in an interview, I’d find a use for them. Once in a while I misjudged someone—like the man I’d just talked to—but mostly they were good people.

“Oh... You’re more than just talk. Unlike me.” Carol had gone back to beating herself up. I thought the surprise would cheer her up, but it had done the opposite.

“What are you getting so upset over?”

“I was talking down to you even though I can’t do anything. Now I feel like I’m...not even human.”

You’re no longer human? That’s a bit much. No matter what you do, you’ll never be worse than that protagonist.

“Why worry about it now? You can work on it after you graduate.”

“Maybe, but it doesn’t change the fact that I ran my mouth off without taking a look at myself first. I’m sorry...”

This is just making me feel awkward. I don’t need a heartfelt apology. She’s never like this.

“L-Look, we’re nearly at the waterwheel. That’ll be fun.”

I doubted my own words—I was struggling to think of anything “fun” about it. I guess you could say that we were heading out of the urban area and into the more idyllic outskirts. The waterside was a clean place to play, and we’d experience the sun and fresh air. Well, maybe that was a stretch...



We walked for a while, saying very little until we finally arrived at our destination.

I still called this place “the waterwheel” as I always had, but there was a lot more than that here now. It had all started with the water mill that was attached to the waterwheel, but we weren’t using that much anymore. Instead, work took place inside three wooden buildings that we’d built near it.

The original building was used to distribute water, drawn using the waterwheel, to the other three buildings via branching pipes. We also used it for storage.

“Hey, there’s a waterwheel,” Carol said.

“Well, yeah... I said so, didn’t I?” I replied.

The hardworking wheel was turning today just like it always did.

“I’ve never seen one.”

The Shiyalta Kingdom had so many rivers that sights like this were hardly few and far between. Others like this one could be found just by walking around a little. Carol must’ve barely ever left the royal capital.

“Hey, Yuri,” Caph said as he emerged from one of the workshops. “Nice to see you.”

“Hey.”

“Oh...? Who’s the lady?” Caph asked, looking at Carol.

“I’m Caro—” she began.

“Carolina,” I said, cutting her off.

What’s she thinking, giving out her real name like that?

Carol realized her mistake and went along with the new name. "I'm Carolina... Nice to meet you."

"You've brought another one of your girls looking for work?" Caph asked me.

Don't say it like that. I only did that once.

"No, she's just visiting."

"Ah... Beaule's such good help that I wouldn't mind if you brought more."

"While I'm here, there's something I wanted to ask," I said.

"What's that?" Caph replied.

"I'll whisper it to you."

"Sure." Caph leaned in close.

"Did you know Myalo's a girl?"

"Uh, Yuri..." Caph stepped back and looked at me in shock.

Caph: Uh, Yuri... Don't be stupid. Myalo's clearly a boy.

Me: You thought so too? Well, it turns out she's actually a girl. I only found out recently.

Caph: What? No way! I don't believe it.

That was how I'd imagined it would play out, at least. Caph's *actual* reaction was, "Are you blind or something? How'd you ever mistake a cute girl like her for a boy?"

Gah... This can't be right!

"Are you *still* doubting that?" Carol looked at me with pity in her eyes.

"I'm not doubting it; I just can't be the only one who didn't realize."

What's wrong with me? What's wrong with my eyes? Give me a new pair.

"Myalo was always careful to keep it a secret whenever she was around you. It's not your fault you didn't realize. Cheer up."



“Even if she was trying to keep it hidden, I’ve been spending time with her for five years now. How could I miss that? Something has to be wrong with me.”

I’m the one who’s no longer human. I couldn’t even tell the gender of my best friend.

“Well, that’s... Don’t feel down.”

“All right...”

“I’m not sure what you’re both talking about, but the guy you left processing the oil was complaining. I don’t think he accomplished anything. You should go look if you’ve got time,” Caph said.

Ah, yeah. Checking on that was the whole reason I came here. That, and because I wanted to ask Caph about Myalo...

Carol’s eyes lit up. “Processing oil? What’s that?”

Some time later, I’d finished up all my business at the waterwheel, and we were heading back toward the dorm. To avoid a depressing walk back along the same street, we took the next street to the north.

“Everyone was so lively. It looks like a nice place to work,” Carol said as we were heading back.

Carol had actually enjoyed being shown around Ho Company facilities. She must’ve really liked the work environment there, because she kept saying nice things about it as we walked.

“If that’s what industry looks like, we need to promote more of it to make this kingdom prosperous,” she added.

“Agreed.”

The kingdom would certainly become prosperous if more companies like mine started up. Unfortunately, there was little chance of that.

“What’ll we do now?” she asked.

I took out a pocket watch—a work of precision engineering by the Amian family—to check the time. Since Carol had made us get up ridiculously early, it wasn’t long past noon. I had nothing else to do today, so we had tons of time

left.

“How about we head to the grand market while we’re here?” I suggested.

If Carol’s escort found out what we’d been doing today, her ward would keep her on a tight leash again like in the past. Carol didn’t seem to have realized it, but it was probably going to happen soon. I thought it was best for her to enjoy freedom while she still had it.

“The market? But I see stores along Royal Castle Road all the time... Well, from my carriage at least.”

“This is nothing like Royal Castle Road. The grand market is where commoners shop.”

Royal Castle Road was a road that ran north to south past the royal castle. The stores there catered to the castle’s staff, and even the taverns were aimed at upper-class customers. Everything sold there was about fifty percent more expensive. Most of the stationery stores wouldn’t even stock Ho paper since it was the cheap alternative.

“You don’t mind? Then sure, take me there.”

“All right. We won’t have much time if we walk, so let’s get a coach.”

There were no timetables or bus stops, but there were horse-drawn coaches that went back and forth along the city’s major roads all day long. Heading from the west toward the grand market in the east would cost a lot, but Carol and I could easily afford it.

“Coach? That’ll be another first for me.”

“I’m not surprised. Let’s grab some lunch and eat at the roadside while we wait. That way we can board the first one that comes.”

We could’ve walked some of the way, but we’d end up on the same stagecoach regardless, so it was better to rest. Conveniently, we found a stall selling meat pies similar to the one from earlier that morning. There was even a bench placed next to it.

“What? We’re eating outside?”

“Sure. No one cares about proper manners around here.”

Carol kept looking around as she ate, like she was a little embarrassed.

Eventually, a carriage came by, and I put out my hand to hail it.

III

“Wow! This is fun! I love being able to look around wherever I want!”

Carol was clearly in high spirits. We’d simply looked around a few places without actually buying anything, but that had been enough to satisfy her. Although she wasn’t an impulsive buyer—not to mention nothing here could tempt someone whose possessions were all as high-quality as hers—she seemed to enjoy window shopping.

“I’m glad you had fun,” I said.

I’d been to this place countless times to shop and on business, so it was nothing new to me. For Carol, however, this was clearly a fresh experience. Still, I’d never been here with anyone who wasn’t an employee... At least not since Rook had brought me here as a child to show me around.

“What? You found it boring?” Carol asked.

“Imagine if we explored Royal Castle Island. You’d be bored, right? I’ve been here so many times that I’ve seen it all.”

Not many stores here caught my interest. I liked looking at weapons, but I’d rather visit places where craftsmen made them than see them sitting in stores.

There were a lot of wholesalers here, but also plenty of tailors and general stores that sold cheap goods aimed at commoners. Carol was particularly interested in the specialist tea stores, but I didn’t care much about those. Since I was only here as her guide, my preferences didn’t matter much.

“Really? Well, what about the open market over there?” she asked, pointing over toward the side of a building that served as a trading firm’s premises.

The building’s wall faced the street, and the area around its entrance was like a small park. This structure was unique among the grand market, since most of the stores were positioned side by side, with their shop fronts facing out onto the street.

Merchants and other people used the area against the wall to run open-air stores, similar to stalls, with their goods laid out on straw mats along the ground.

I'd been curious enough about this way of doing business to ask Caph about it in the past. He told me that someone could set up a mat on the ground for a day or two, and as long as they didn't make too much money, the witches wouldn't complain about the unauthorized trade happening in their territory. The trader would, after all, be gone before long, and their minuscule profits weren't worth taking from them.

"Stores like that must change a lot, right? Maybe you'll see something new there," Carol said.

"These look more interesting than the rest. Maybe we'll find something rare."

That said, I didn't have a keen eye for rare items. I could tell a good piece of clothing or crockery from a bad one, but I couldn't identify a famous artist's work or put a price tag on an antique. Carol would probably be better at that than me.

"Let's go take a look."

Carol excitedly headed over to the wall. I followed behind her hoping we'd find something interesting.

We walked among the makeshift shops, taking it all in. Though we didn't see anything as bad as people selling broken teacups, there was nothing I actually wanted either. Much like other times I'd been here, it was mostly collections of junk. One seller appeared to be a hunter from the countryside. They were selling cheap hides that they must've tanned themselves, but that didn't interest me too much. If only someone had been selling a cart full of white fluffy lint, that might've caught my eye.

"Hm... What's this?" Carol asked one of the vendors. She showed some interest in what was basically just a worthless knickknack, despite having no desire to buy it.

"You ain't seen one before?" the vendor replied. "It's a wooden mallet for breakin' crab shells. It'll make 'em taste real good."

“Oh... I see.”

It might’ve been common to use a special tool like that to break open crabs in regions on the far side of the mountains, but I’d never used one. Here in the royal capital, we had specialized scissors for breaking them open. Using mallets to smash one’s food wasn’t considered a refined way of doing things, so Carol would probably never use one her whole life. As I expected, she quickly lost interest in it.

She looked eager to get away from the vendor as he began to drone on about his wares, so I helped her out.

“Let’s go, Carolina.”

“Ah... Okay. Bye.” Carol bowed her head briefly at the vendor, then left him.

“It’s pretty much all rubbish. Nothing I want,” I said.

“Looks like a lot of these are used goods.”

That was a polite way to put it. Still, she was right that some of the vendors were selling used clothes and suchlike.

“It’s all so cheap. Can people really make a living selling this stuff?” Carol asked.

“Hmm... I don’t know. I guess people just find it better to sell their things than throw them away. It’s more profitable than sitting at home, anyway.”

It would obviously be more profitable to earn an hourly wage at some proper place of employment, but real jobs were hard to come by.

“Yeah... I suppose so.”

“Hm?”

As we were talking, something interesting caught my eye.

“He’s selling a spear point. Let’s have a look,” I said.

“Weapons? I have to praise your sharp eye.”

I wasn’t sure I deserved any praise—it turned out it wasn’t much of a weapon store. Just a damaged spear point, along with some assorted traveling gear, lay on a mat. It was less of a shop and more like someone getting rid of their trash.

I figured I'd take a look at the wares anyway. It was fun to imagine that the weapon he was selling actually had great historical importance.

"Mind if I take a look? You're selling the spear, right?"

"Yes. I don't have the money to repair it," the vendor replied.

I guessed he was a former Kilhinan soldier. I picked up the weapon from the mat and noted that its blade was sharpened down one edge. It was also still attached to a broken shaft.

The shaft itself was made from wood and was marred by a clean cut that went partway into it. But whatever caused the cut mustn't have gone far enough to sever it in two. Given its material, it wasn't suitable for blocking a strike from a sharp weapon. Still, it must've been the only means of defense someone had in the midst of some battle. Fortunately for the wielder, it had taken the hit from the sword or spear without being completely cut in two. But the cut had made it fragile—it looked like the shaft had been completely snapped in half by force later.

After carefully examining the point, I lost interest and put the broken spear back down.

"This looks well used... Sorry, but I don't think it's any good now."

"I see." He sounded disappointed.

It was a well-made spear, but the end must've been re-sharpened after being badly chipped in battle. As a result, the hardened metal at the sharp edge was worn down close to the softer metal on the blunt side. It would function well enough for a little while, but not for much longer. I'd heard that spears ended up like this after being used to fight against foes wearing hard armor.

At any rate, the weapon didn't hold much appeal for me.

As I examined the rest of his items, something strange caught my eye. "Hm? Is that a ring?"

"That's right."

"Could I take a look?"

"Go ahead." The soldier picked it up by his feet and gave it to me.

Carol examined the accessory resting on my palm. “What’s that? There’s a blue gemstone on it.”

“Yeah.”

She leaned in to get a closer look at the ring. It was tainted with a dark coating, but it had a surprisingly large translucent blue jewel.

Blue gemstones weren’t particularly rare in this kingdom, but they were usually opaque with splatters of other colors inside. There were also transparent stones with just a touch of blue, or a pale, watery color at best. None of these interested the Shanti, so they held little value.

This jewel was different. Despite being translucent, it had an incredibly deep color, like a beautiful sapphire. The ring itself was probably silver. Without proper care, silver would sulfurize and darken like this one had, but there were easy ways to restore its shine.

“Where’d you get this ring?” I asked.

“I won it in a bet on the battlefield from someone who told me he’d got it off a Kulati invader.”

So it came from the south.

Ms. Ether had told me that nations that followed Yeesusism traded with the whole world, so it really might’ve been a sapphire.

“Hmm... How much?” I asked.

“What’s it worth to you?” He sounded like he planned to drive a hard bargain.

I took a look inside my purse. There were about ten gold coins in there.

“How about five silvers?”

Even if the gemstone wasn’t worth much, there was still the ring itself. Still, it could only contain about as much silver as one coin, so my offer was probably too much. If the soldier took it to a pawn shop, he’d surely get a lower offer.

“Hmpf... It’s worth more than that.”

“Six then?”

“Not enough.”

“Forget it then.”

I tightened up my purse string and returned the piece of jewelry.

“Let’s go,” I told Carol. “I thought it might suit you, but it’s a little too pricey.”

“Wh-What?” she said.

I took her hand and walked away.



“What? Didn’t you want it?” Carol asked when we’d moved away from the store.

“That man’s hungry for money.”

“What? Well, of course he is. He wouldn’t be running that shop if he wasn’t.”

That’s not what I meant.

“He’s poor. He didn’t understand how much that ring was worth. That’s why he asked me to make an offer first.”

“Ah, that’s why... But why give up? If you didn’t have enough money, I would’ve lent you some of mine since you’ve looked after me today.”

That was true. The whole reason I’d moved away was because I’d expected Carol to make that offer.

“It’s hard to reach a deal without knowing its actual value. Poor people are always worried about losing out. Try repeating what you just said in front of him and watch him put the price up. You’ll make things even harder.”

It was easy for him to raise the price above any offer I made, and then he might never lower it again. Making a deal was hard because we couldn’t agree on the ring’s value. Even if I offered far more than it was worth, he might continue holding out for more.

“The ring’s worth about three silvers, but if he keeps asking for more money, we’ll end up paying him several gold coins. The trick is to let him cool off.”

“And that’s why you’ve stopped bargaining with him for now?”

“Right. Give him some time. He’ll start to think he missed out on a good deal,

won't he?"

"Wow... You're right. I didn't realize there was a psychological aspect to it."

"I didn't realize you knew any long words."

I didn't expect Carol to be any good at the psychological side of haggling.

Rather than respond to my snide remark, Carol looked down a little and said something unexpected. "So...does that mean you weren't buying it for me...?"

"What? You liked it?"

"Not really..." Carol turned her head and looked away from me.

She's like a kid. Well, I suppose she is a kid.

After walking a little farther, another type of business caught Carol's eye.

"Huh? What's that store?"

I looked over and saw a familiar sort of building.

"Oh, that? It's a gambling hall."

Places like this needed permits before the witches would let them operate in the city. Most people did their gambling in the shady corners of taverns where regulations couldn't touch them. For people who just couldn't get enough, though, such buildings hosted more serious games.

"Gambling hall? People place bets there?"

"Wanna take a look? You might learn something new about society."

I knew she'd say no. I'd never seen Carol make a bet of any kind. For her, this place was probably the next worst thing after a brothel.

"Let's go in. I wanna see it."

"Huh?!" I practically cried out in surprise.

"What's the problem?" Carol frowned at me. "It's not like gambling's illegal. People do it at the dorm, even."

As a rule, bets at the dorm were always for ten ruga or less. The money was mostly just there to add a little spice to a game.

“We’d better not,” I warned.

How can she be fine with gambling when brothels make her so angry?

It was as though Carol had no understanding of just how immoral gambling could be. In her mind, it must’ve been a line of business as respectable as any other. That might’ve been thanks to the dorm’s ten-ruga-or-less rule, which made sure our fun never caused any trouble. And, as luck would have it, there was no one in our year who’d ruined themselves by losing all their money either.

I wasn’t going to prevent her from forming her own opinions, but there was no denying that her personality wasn’t suited to it.

“Come on.” Carol looked at me like she was daring me. “I wanna see as many unfamiliar parts of the world as possible today. Won’t you go in with me?”

All right, fine... I figured it might be a valuable experience for her. She could get through life just fine without learning about gambling, but there was a chance she’d need the experience some day in the future while coming up with a law to restrict it or something.

“If you insist, then fine. Just make your bets with your own money.”

“Obviously. I’ve never done it before, but I know it’s all down to luck.”

“Err, yeah... Pretty much...”

I started to worry that she might start off winning thanks to beginner’s luck. I hated to imagine I was sowing the seeds of a future addiction.



The inside of the gambling hall was surprisingly stylish and neatly arranged, though many of the grubby-looking customers were still in keeping with the commoner market where it was located.

The employees stared at us as we entered, but no one told us to leave. I actually would’ve preferred it if they did—now we’d have to play a game.

“Hmm...”

Carol pursed her lips as we walked by various tables where games were taking

place. She examined each one for a short while before walking over to another.

“Don’t tell me you’ve never seen any of these games before?” I asked.

“You’re right... You know them?”

“Not all of them. That’s a good one, I think,” I said, pointing to a table. “The rules are really simple; even an idiot can learn it.”

“An idiot...?” Carol shot back while glaring at me.

You’re just incriminating yourself here.

“I’m just saying how simple it is. No one’s forcing you to play something that takes a month to learn.”

“Well, maybe... It says ‘Fourteen’ on that sign. Is that the game’s name?”

“That’s right.”

I gave Carol a brief explanation of the rules.

Fourteen used three sets of cards—numbered one to seven—which totaled twenty-one cards. To start, the dealer would place one card facedown on the table. Then, much like in blackjack, he’d deal players one card each, placing them faceup on the table. Players would then be dealt new cards, one at a time, until they asked the dealer to stop. The player’s aim was to have their cards sum to fourteen. If they went over that value, they’d go bust and lose the game automatically.

The unique part was that the facedown card would be revealed at the end and added to every player’s total, so anyone who already had a hand that amounted to fourteen was sure to go bust.

Additionally, if a player had started out with a seven and then stuck with just that, they’d triple their winnings for that game if the facedown card was another seven. Here, however, the payout was reduced to double the bet, and the players didn’t need to pay up double if the dealer happened to win with double sevens.

It meant that even if Carol were to bet all the money she had, she couldn’t be asked to give the dealer more money.

It was an easy game to play with small amounts of money, making it the second most popular game at the Knight Academy dorm after togi.

I explained all of this to Carol, and she was smart enough to quickly grasp everything I told her.

“You can expect the facedown card to be worth about four. So you should aim for a hand of between seven and ten.”

“If four’s the average, wouldn’t a hand of nine, ten, or eleven be ideal?”

“That’d be right if you couldn’t go bust, but fifteen is a much worse score than twelve. You lose automatically if you go over fourteen, so it’s best to aim for something just under.”

It was often better to count cards and then guess the facedown card’s value, but that was difficult because the cards were shuffled between games.

“Ah, I see now. Makes sense. Got it.”

“Go on and give it a try.”

We headed toward a table where the game was being played.

“Can we join?” I asked the dealer.

There were three seats for players at the table, but they were all unoccupied.

Several people could play against the dealer at once. In fact, the cheers, groans, and even screams that came from players each time the facedown was revealed made this an ideal party game, so it was often enjoyed by large groups. Normally, it was played with a deck of 21 cards, but two decks could be combined to give double the number of cards when there were more than four or five participants.

“Of course,” the dealer replied. “Are you both playing?”

“No, just her. Would it be all right if I take a seat until other players arrive? It’s her first time, so I’m explaining the rules to her.”

“That’s no problem at all, sir.” The formally dressed dealer gestured toward the seats.

“Thank you.”

Carol sat opposite the dealer in the central chair, with her back straight. She looked like she was steeling herself to take an exam. That wouldn't be so bad if she actually *did* something, but she sat there without moving. She seemed to be waiting for the dealer to give out cards.

"Hey," I said.

"What? Aren't we starting?"

"I said it's a gambling hall, didn't I? Do you think the dealer's going to decide your bet?"

"Oh!" Carol hastily pulled out her purse like she'd just remembered where she was.

Oh jeez, she's getting her whole purse out.

"All right. Here it is."

Carol took out one gold coin and placed it down. It felt odd to see her bet without using chips, but everyone around us was doing the same, so there was nothing wrong with it. What wasn't normal was the amount she'd offered. Even the dealer's poker face slipped a little when he saw it. For a moment, his smile became the face of a wolf stalking its prey.

A gold coin was worth a thousand ruga or ten silver coins. Roughly speaking, a thousand ruga was about a hundred thousand yen—much more than a young girl was likely to put down on the table during her first game. If she hadn't been too flustered to think it through, she probably would've chosen something smaller.

"Well then, let's begin."

The dealer shuffled the cards and then put one facedown on the table. Next, he put down another card in front of Carol, faceup.

I'd investigated the card-making process in the past since it was related to my business. They were made from two pieces of thick parchment, given a thick coating of glue, and then pressed together. They didn't have the flexibility of plastic cards, but they were sturdy enough to be thrown without flipping over or fluttering around in the air.

A number was written on the front, while the rear was painted white. Some cards also had patterned backs like playing cards from my past life, but professional cards in places like this used plain colors. That was because the technology wasn't good enough to print patterns without any smudging, color splashes, or variation in angle. I wouldn't want to touch these cards too much, though, because they'd probably been made using white lead.

"A seven?" Carol said, looking at her card.

The dealer's card was a four.

"Hmm... Should I ask for another?" she asked.

"You should stick with that."

I was no expert, but I knew that a seven gave someone a good chance of winning, so it wasn't a bad value to stick with. All the more so because a triple payout would result if the facedown card was a seven...well, double in this case. The big payout was always worth aiming for. The fact that the amount was slightly less here changed nothing. Sticking with the hand she had was the best option by far.

"Okay, I'll stick with this."

"I'll draw," the dealer announced before giving himself another card.

His new card was a six, giving him a total score of ten.

"Now, let's determine the winner."

The dealer turned over the facedown card. It was a six.

"Congratulations."

"I won?" Carol looked at me in surprise.

"Yeah. Well done."

She had a six, so it wasn't double sevens. Since the dealer had bust with a score of sixteen, though, she'd won.

The dealer opened a drawer in the table, removed a gold coin from a box, and placed it in front of Carol. In the span of about a minute, she'd earned as much money as a commoner in the royal capital made in a month. This was what

made gambling frightening.

“Hmm... I get it. It’s kinda fun.”

“Satisfied? Then let’s head home.”

“I wanna play a little more. You all right with that?”

She hadn’t had enough. As much as she hated losing, she rarely ever won at togi because she was so bad at it. Her victory here might’ve been exactly what she was hungry for.

“All right... Sure.”

Maybe it’ll be entertaining to watch her downfall...



“I lost...”

Unsurprisingly, Carol had been an easy mark. She hadn’t known when to quit, just like always. In total, she had six victories and ten losses.

She’d been so into the experience, fluctuating between joy and disappointment, that other gamblers had gathered to watch.

“I’m out of money. Let’s go home.”

Carol looked upset. It was no surprise—she’d just taken the stash that she’d been carefully saving up and blown it all in an hour.

She’d started with three gold coins and eleven silvers—worth about 410,000 yen—and now she’d lost it all. As a royal family member, money might not have meant much to her, but she must’ve spent at least a month or two saving it up.

Carol stood up, looking defeated.

“Do you mind if I play a game?” I moved into the chair that Carol had been sitting in.

“What? Don’t you think it’s time to quit?”

That’s exactly what I’ve been asking you this whole time!

The bad experience must’ve finally instilled some common sense into her. That would be worth more than the money she’d just lost.

I wasn't ready to leave just yet, though.

"It's no problem, is it?" I asked the dealer.

"Of course not, sir."

"But let her deal the cards. You don't mind, do you?"

"I beg your pardon?" the dealer asked, knitting his brow. "I'm sorry, sir, but we can't allow our customers to do that."

"Will this change your mind?" I took five gold coins out of my purse and placed them on the table.

Behind me I heard one of the gamblers exclaim, "Would'ya look at this kid?!"

They probably thought that I was Carol's boyfriend trying to avenge her. The amount I'd placed down was a large sum. It was rare for anyone to bet even one gold coin here in the commoner district, much less five.

"Very well..."

"You'll accept?" I asked, looking the dealer straight in the eye.

"Yes. If that's your wish, it's no problem."

The dealer grinned and passed the deck over to us. It was a brand-new set with plain white backs.

Cards would grow scratched, stained, and creased after a lot of use, which made it possible to remember their values based on the back's condition. That was fine for a casual game between two friends, but not in a gambling hall, so the decks would often be replaced.

This was why they only contained twenty-one cards. The cards themselves were expensive, so a larger deck would've been too costly to replace.

"Carolina, please shuffle."

"Uh, okay... I'm not very good, though."

Carol picked up the pile from the table and, with clumsy hand movements, she repeatedly split the deck in two and swapped the two halves.

"You're good to start?" I asked the dealer.

“Whenever you’re ready, sir.”

“Carolina.” I passed Carol one of the pieces of Ho paper that I always carried around as samples and whispered something in her ear.

“Got it.”

Carol put a card facedown on the table, and then she placed the thin piece of Ho paper over it.

“What’s the meaning of this?” the dealer asked. “That’s a violation of our rules.”

“What’s the problem?” I asked. “Please explain why this isn’t allowed.”

“Well...” the dealer hesitated.

Placing a piece of paper over a facedown card shouldn’t have caused any problems at all.

So his trick is switching out the card.

He’d let Carol win the first game she’d played, but after that, he’d only let her win games if her bet was a few silvers. I’d guessed that he was cheating somehow. There were also a few other factors that made me suspicious.

Fourteen was a very simple game. Unlike togi and other board games, it was hard to win consistently based on skill level. A player who’d carefully considered their strategy should’ve won against the dealer roughly fifty percent of the time—though the dealer would still have a small advantage if they were capable of counting cards.

What *really* didn’t make sense was that double sevens resulted in a double pay out. While the occurrence sounded rare, it actually happened surprisingly often in practice. If the player had close to a fifty percent chance of winning, and the double sevens rule was purely in their favor, then they should’ve always profited at the dealer’s expense in the long run.

I thought that maybe the cards had marks that the dealer had memorized, but the lead paint on their surfaces was pure white—there was no dirt or fingerprints to speak of. The cards were kept perfectly clean to instill confidence in the players.

I also considered that he might be deliberately drawing cards of a specific value, like a magician might, but that couldn't be the trick here—he'd agreed to let Carol deal, after all.

The remaining possibility was that he was switching out the facedown card for another. If he could change the value of that card, he'd win virtually every game.

Maybe I was being overly suspicious, but the fact that no other players were sitting at this table might've been because they knew that this dealer used dirty tricks. He'd been fairly brazen about it while deceiving Carol.

"If you can't accept my bet because of this violation, then fine. You can remove the paper."

There was a small group of four gamblers behind me. The dealer didn't want to remove the paper with people watching, because it could damage his reputation for fairness. I'd been counting on that.

"But think about it—this isn't some trick that gives me an advantage. And I'm sure you consider yourself a professional gambler. You're not afraid to take on a younger kid like me without using tricks, are you?"

The dealer would have to agree. It wouldn't be a huge loss to him if I won. The money he'd scammed Carol out of would cover most of the loss, and nine silvers would make up the remainder. That wasn't big money.

In terms of risk and return, running away carried a bigger risk. I'd thought of all this when I limited myself to a bet of five gold coins.

"Very well. I have no objection. But if this is an attempt at foul play..."

I knew he'd agree.

"Sure. I'll be the loser in that case. But I don't know any tricks of that sort anyway."

"I'd also like to ask that you pay the penalty if the house wins with double sevens, sir."

Thought he might say that.

He probably didn't think I'd have enough money left in my purse to cover it

after putting down such a large bet. His intention was to scare me off with a risk that I couldn't afford to take. Luckily for me, I had money to spare.

"Fine. If you're done making conditions, let's get started."

"Yuri, wait. Do you think he was cheating?" Carol asked, visibly angry.

I wished she hadn't said it out loud—it sounded so crude. A euphemism would've kept us from feeling awkward.

"Keep quiet. Don't interfere with a serious bet."

"But... I'm not letting him get away with cheating."

She was right to be angry, but it was her own fault for falling for it.

Carol's personality made it hard to get over the fact that she'd been slighted. I worried she might reveal her true identity and sentence him right there, like a scene from a Japanese period drama. The dealer would probably respond by pretending to be sorry and then giving back her money... But that didn't feel right. It wouldn't be a good lesson for her to learn.

"Are you going to get in the way of my game? I'm the one who's playing right now. I don't need you butting in with advice."

"Fine... But make sure you win. Don't lose to this swindler."

Carol was strangely enthusiastic. I was only going through with this because I'd feel bad if I left with a purse full of coins after Carol had been left penniless. I already felt bad enough for stirring up an interest in gambling in her, only for her to be robbed blind.

"It's fine. Just deal me a card."

"Okay."

Carol placed a card in front of me—a three—then hesitated.

"What's wrong? Give him one next."

"O-Okay."

The card Carol gave to the dealer was a seven. Now, if the card facedown was another seven, I'd have to pay up double. I didn't think there was any way he could be cheating, so it simply had to be down to bad luck.

“I’ll have another,” I said.

“I won’t draw. I’m sticking,” the dealer announced.

After we’d both announced our intentions, Carol placed another card before me. It was a one, giving me a total of four.

“Another.”

Seven was a strong score because it was the highest a player could have with no chance of going bust, even if the facedown card was another seven. In other words, I’d definitely lose if I had seven or less. The next card Carol dealt me was a two; that gave me a total of six.

“Another.”

“Ah...” Carol made a noise as she looked at the card in her hand.

I had a bad feeling.

“Just give it to me. It is what it is.”

“O-Okay...”

The card Carol put down was a seven.

“Oh, man...” I said. “You really come through at times like this, don’t you?”

I had a total of thirteen, so now I felt helpless. That said, a seven in my hand meant that all three sevens in the deck would have to be in play for the facedown card to be another seven. That rarely happened, so to some extent, it was a relief.

“We won’t know the outcome until we finish our game, sir,” the dealer added with a grin. He too looked relieved.

“Let’s finish this. Carolina, reveal the card.”

“Sorry... It’s my fault that you’re...”

“Don’t be stupid. I made the bet. Whether I win or lose, that’s on me. If you tell me otherwise, it’s like I’m less of a man.”

This could’ve also served as a good lesson for Carol. Even if the facedown card was a seven, I’d know we’d gotten something that money couldn’t normally buy

in exchange for ten or twenty gold coins. For someone like her, it would be difficult to experience anything like this ever again, regardless of what her future held.

Carol removed the paper from the card, then turned it over.

“Huh...”

To Carol’s surprise, the card was a one.

A one?

“You did it!” Carol cheered, sounding like a little girl.

“Whoa.” The gamblers behind us were surprised too. “Not bad at all, kid.”

The odds had been about one in seven. It wasn’t a huge coincidence that I’d gotten the card I needed, but it felt like one given how the game had just gone.

After I’d already given up and come to terms with my loss, this left me uncertain about how to feel.

“It’s your victory, sir. Luck was certainly on your side.”

“Hand over the money.”

I wasn’t about to start talking to this cheater. Now that I’d won, I wanted to get out of here.

“Yes indeed, sir. Spoils to the victor. Congratulations, Yuri.”

The dealer took five gold coins from the box and placed them on the table.

He must’ve remembered my name after Carol had accidentally said it out loud; though it wasn’t exactly worth remembering over a small happening like this.

“Here. Try not to lose them again,” I told Carol, passing four gold coins and a single silver one to her.

She now had the exact amount of money she’d started with.

“You’re sure? You earned it.”

“I wasn’t playing to make money. I can go to work for that. Come on, let’s go.”

“Okay.”

Carol nodded and stuffed the money into her purse. I took her by the hand and led her out of the gambling hall.



We left the gambling hall just in time to catch the last of the daylight. I was hungry, but decided it was better to finish up and return to the academy first. The route to the school from here was one of the safer areas of the city, but we didn't want to be out by the time darkness fell—especially since we'd been seen with so much money.

"Gambling halls are scary. I'm keeping away from them," Carol said to no one in particular after we'd been walking for a while.

Thankfully, she'd learned from the experience. She was as badly suited to gambling as I'd expected, and now she'd avoid it her whole life.

"I know how you feel. Gambling's not much fun anyway."

"You don't like it? Looked like you were good at it."

"I only won because of luck, so I don't really care. I get more satisfaction winning a bout with Dolla or a togi game against Myalo."

If anyone said it was amazing that the card was a one, I'd have to ask them why exactly. I certainly hadn't done anything amazing—it wouldn't be any different from being told that I'd gotten lucky. I got more enjoyment out of contests based on skill.

I wouldn't shy away from gambling if confronted with it like I'd been today, but I felt there'd never come a day when I chose to partake in it for the sake of killing time.

"It's not like you to have a levelheaded mindset like that," Carol said.

"I'm one of the most levelheaded students around."

It wasn't just Carol—several people had said similar things to me. I had no idea what everyone thought was so wrong with my life, especially given that I avoided alcohol, gambling, and prostitution. Most students were into all three.

"Aren't we heading straight home for the day? Where are you taking us?" she asked.

“What? You’ve forgotten already? I said I’d buy the ring.”

I headed toward the makeshift shops against the wall. I could see the soldier was still there in the distance, and I doubted he’d sold it yet.

“Follow my lead, Carolina.”

“Sure.”

We reached the soldier’s mat. Sure enough, the jewelry was still there.

“We’d like that ring after all. She won’t shut up about it. What do you want for it?”

“One gold coin.”

He clearly wasn’t a skilled merchant, since it was a ridiculous price to start from. I had to wonder whether he’d asked someone what it was worth and been given bad information. It obviously wasn’t worth a gold coin—even five silvers had been too much.

“I’m getting ripped off here. How about nine silvers? That’s all I’ve got in my purse,” I told the soldier. I turned to Carol and said loudly enough to make sure he heard, “If he says no, you’ll have to give up on it.”

“Nine...? All right, you’ve got a deal.”

He offered me the ring. I took nine silvers from my purse, making sure he didn’t see the gold coins, and put them in his palm.

“Sounds like there’s still money in your purse.”

He’d heard the remaining coins rattling.

“That’s for today’s food. You’re too greedy for your own good.”

“Hmpf,” the soldier snorted, but he didn’t try to argue back.

He clenched his fist around the money and released his grip on the ring as I took it from him. Maybe he’d use the funds to mend his spear. Either way, I’d probably never see him again.

“See you.”

We walked off and left the soldier.

As we were walking, I gave the ring to Carol. "Here."

"Huh? What?"

"It's yours."

"Y-You're giving it to me? Why?"

She acted like she didn't want it, but she couldn't quite hide the happiness that accompanied her surprise. She had to have seen plenty of fancy jewelry before, but getting something as a gift pleased her.

"I might as well do something with the money I got from winning that bet. You wanted it, right?"

"Oh... C-Can I put it on?"

"If you don't mind it being a little dirty, sure."

Carol put the tainted accessory on her ring finger; it was way too big. She proceeded to try it on one finger after the next, but it was too big for even her thumb. Since it had been plundered from a battlefield, it had probably once been worn regularly by a man.

"It...doesn't fit..."

"If you like it, it can be adjusted. There are workers who'll do it in no time."

"I didn't know that was possible. Sure, I'll do that."

"Let me just see it on your finger."

"Okay."



Carol put the ring on her index finger and showed it to me while holding it in place from behind. Her fingernails were cut short, and her skin was rough from her training, but it didn't look like a man's hand. It matched the rest of her just fine.

The large, cut sapphire sparkled. I looked at the gem's light, then at Carol's face. With my finger, I gently lifted the wig's bangs to uncover her eyes.

"Wh-What are you doing...?" Carol protested softly when our eyes met.

"I knew it. It's the same color as your eyes—the same deep blue. It suits you."

Carol was speechless as I took my hand away from her forehead.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

Carol covered her face with both hands and cried, "Y-You idiot! Don't say things like that!"

"Now you can't see."

"Walk ahead of me! And stay there! No looking back!"

"If you're behind me, I won't notice if you're kidnapped. Tell you what, hold my hand and I won't have to turn around."

"Your hand?!"

I took Carol's motionless left hand in mine and tugged it gently, causing her to turn as red as an apple and look at her feet.

"Let's go," I said.

We began to slowly walk as I led her by hand.

Afterword

We haven't met since the previous volume. My name is Fudeorca.

Fortunately, a second volume has been released to the world. I consider everything the result of the support you've all given me. I'm sincerely thankful.

In this volume, a character named Ether Vino—who came from outside of the Shanti region—was introduced, and the story has gone from something on the scale of a small country to something a lot bigger. Ether is a lovely character with her own unique religious views.

I suspect many people don't like the idea of involving religion in a story. To a believer, religion is a precious source of strength that's vulnerable to attack. Meanwhile, to many nonbelievers, it's nothing more than a ridiculous set of fictitious beliefs. This is why many believers become insular, and conflicts easily arise when two religions run up against each other.

As I'm sure is clear already, Yeesusism is originally inspired by a major religion that uses a similar name, but it has a completely different outlook on some matters—such as life after death. That's because I'd like people to think of the two as completely unrelated.

My hope is that my dear readers will understand that the two religions are different things that exist in separate worlds, and that they won't come away with a negative impression of faith in the real world.

Thinking back to when I first wrote it all, I remember feeling like I was moving through a lot of plot developments quickly. Now that the story is in book form, it's a little hard to believe it fills two whole volumes already. You might say I made it quite lengthy.

To all of the readers who have supported me, I'd like to thank you once again.



I have a little bit of space left, so I think I'll continue with the story I was telling in the previous afterword.

“Someone in a car who was approaching from behind called for me to stop,” my father said. “He was a man of close to sixty—about the same age as me—driving a Toyota Corolla. I glanced through the window and saw he had a mountain of belongings in there. It looked like he’d been living out of his car for quite some time. It’s not every day that someone like that talks to you while you’re walking around this area. He was talking to me from his open window.”

“What’d he say?” I asked.

“He said, ‘Give me a copy of today’s paper.’”



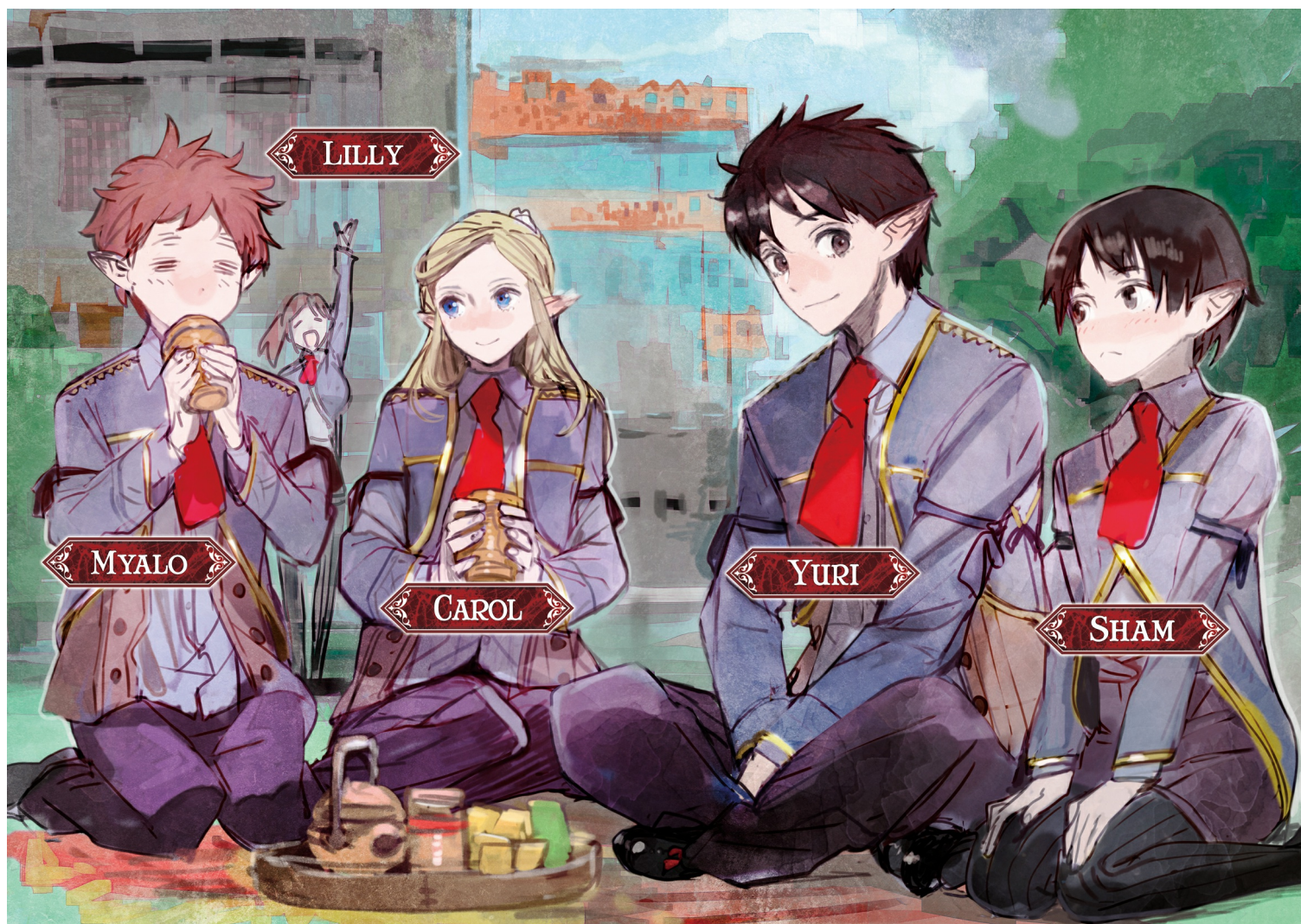
Oh dear, I’m out of space once again.

I hate to do this, but I’ll continue in the next volume. I hope I get the chance to tell the rest.

“Good boy.”

Rather than shrink away,
Stardust presented his beak
when Carol reached out
her hand to pet him.





“Question is,
does Yuri plan
to take me along
with him...?”



Bonus Short Stories

Sham's Course on Table Manners

Sham was taking the table manners exam that day. As laughable as it was, it was a compulsory course at the Cultural Academy. Some students had been granted exemption before the course had started, but Sham hadn't been so lucky. It was enough to make her wonder what this school was even for.

There was a teacup resting on the table. Sham gripped its handle and lifted it to her mouth, making sure to leave the saucer in place.

Logically speaking, a saucer's purpose was to catch any tea that might spill from the cup, preventing it from staining the tablecloth or someone's clothes. Therefore, it made sense to lift the saucer along with the teacup when drinking from it, but it was too cumbersome to do every single time.

Setting was important too—if Sham had been sitting on a sofa accompanied by a knee-high table, the risk of a spill would be fairly high. It would be appropriate to lift the saucer in such a scenario. Today, however, she was drinking from a regular table, so there was no need to lift it along with the nearby teacup. The table's edge was close to her stomach; she was safe.

Sham was in a constant state of irritation. She couldn't stop thinking about how stupid and pointless the exercise was. The cup wasn't full of coal tar, so would it have even mattered if she spilled a little of this watery drink?

"What wonderful tea," Sham said, without really meaning it—it was simply something she'd been taught to say.

"Please help yourself to a bite to eat," the instructor, who was providing the hospitality (according to the scenario), urged.

Sham held back a sigh. To her, it was a lot more than a bite—the accompaniment was essentially a stack of three small pancakes smothered in honey and butter. It was like it had been chosen to torment her.

But if she'd requested another confection with a true-to-size name instead, that would've been an instant fail.

"Thank you..."

Sham took a breath, then worked out her plan of attack. The supposed bite-to-eat was sitting on a plate a short distance away.

First, she put her napkin down on the tablecloth. Then, she leaned forward slightly to reach the plate and moved it to the edge of the table. Next, she took a large dish and placed it down. That way, both plates overlapped with the napkin.

Since the dishes on the table were round, rather than square, there would always be a risk of getting honey on the tablecloth when transferring the food from one to another. She'd have to think of some way to prevent that. That was what the napkin was for.

With everything successfully put in place, Sham picked up the tool—something that resembled a spatula—resting on the pancake plate. It was too small for the pancakes, so she also had to stab the confection with her fork at the same time. Then, she transferred it to her plate in one swift movement.

A mixture of honey and butter dripped down, but—through sheer good luck—the droplets all landed on her plate.

Sham returned the main platter to its original position and reclaimed her napkin. After cutting a bite-size piece from her pancake, she lifted it to her mouth while holding an even smaller dish under it to catch any errant trickles.

The sweet flavor of honey and butter filled her mouth. It was a little cold, but it still tasted good. She swallowed it, then drank some tea to wash away the taste that remained.

"This is delicious. The honey especially is... How should I put this? It's rather complex and delicate."

"Honey is inexpensive in this region."

Can I yell at her? Who cares about honey?! I only complimented it because the rules said I had to!

“Ah ha ha... Oh, really...?”

Sham wondered if she should say something about the butter next, but she worried that she’d come to regret bringing it up.

“The butter, however, is of the finest quality, sourced from Ho Province,” the instructor added.

Sham realized she’d been expected to mention the butter after all.

How am I meant to notice its taste in the middle of an exam?!

“I see. That explains the delicate flavor and—”

“Rich flavor,” the instructor corrected her.

“That explains the rich flavor.”

Don’t tell me I just failed again?



“I must ask you to excuse me.” Sham stood up and gave a ladylike bow before leaving the table. “Phew...”

“Heh... That was a big sigh.”

“Whoa,” Sham exclaimed in surprise.

Carol had appeared beside her.

“W-Were you watching?” Sham asked.

“Yep. The whole thing.”

Carol must’ve been standing somewhere behind Sham as she took the exam.

“Oh, now I’m embarrassed...”

“Don’t worry. You probably passed.”

“Did I? But I shouldn’t have said the honey was good.”

“There aren’t many marks placed in conversation. You took the pancake right, and you handled it calmly. Putting a napkin down was a smart idea.”

“Thank you...”

“Heh... But who eats honey-soaked pancakes when they’re having tea? I

would've struggled to keep a straight face. Heh heh." Carol laughed at the idea.

Sham hadn't been to many tea gatherings, so she had only just realized how unusual it was. It would've qualified as a light meal in a teahouse. The exam always involved strange food choices, which suggested that the instructor was deliberately making it awkward.

"I couldn't laugh about it... I've failed three times already. I just want to be done with it."

"Don't worry. I think you passed by a wide margin. If that was a fail, then barely anyone would pass."

"If that's what you think, then maybe I should stop worrying."

Sham relaxed a little. Carol was royalty, so she was bound to be an expert in table manners. If Sham had passed in Carol's eyes, then she certainly hadn't made any fatal errors.

"Are you headed to your room, Sham?"

"That was the plan, yes."

"Mind if I come along too? I want to hear the latest news about White Birch from Lilly. We can have ourselves a more relaxed tea session."

News about White Birch?

Carol hadn't been around much lately. She must've wanted to catch up on everything she'd missed. Not that anything exciting ever happened in the little dormitory.

It must be tough being a princess, Sham thought. "I don't mind at all."

"I've brought some good snacks," Carol said. "Let's go."

Twilight Lilly

I heard a familiar voice. "Hey. Is Yuri around?"

I immediately got up and headed to the front desk.

"Hello, Lilly. What brings you here?" I asked.

Lilly was at Ho Company's front desk, dressed in casual clothes and carrying a large box.

"I finished the sextant, so I reckoned I'd come drop it off."

"Ah, all right. Thank you. But you should have let me come to pick it up."

"I was in the area anyhow."

That explained the casual clothes.

"If it's not too sudden, maybe we could test it out now?" I asked.

"Sure. Wanna head up to the roof?"

"That sounds good. It's this way. Follow me."

I guided Lilly up to the roof of the building. We used a staircase out on the veranda to head up to an area where there was a place for tethering a kineagle. It was a spot that might've been handy to have during emergencies... Though I'd never actually needed it because it was right next to the Ho family manor.

"Are you all right?" I asked as I extended a hand to help her climb to the top of the ladder.

"Thank you," Lilly said in her unusual accent as she let me help her up.

"Mind if I open it?"

Lilly's sextant lay in its own box. Although it wasn't wrapped up or decoratively packaged, it was still neatly contained. As a watchmaker's daughter, she probably knew a lot about packing things.

"Go ahead," she said.

I opened the box and removed the item before experimenting with it a little. I estimated where the horizon was, then aimed the smoked glass at the sun.

The smoked glass was a little bigger than the mirror, so it completely covered the dazzling sunlight. It shaded the light to just the right degree too.

I took my eye away and checked the angle. The protractor was a well-made tool that made the result easy to read off.

It was then that I realized just how low the sun was, and how close it was to setting. I'd been so engrossed in my work that I hadn't noticed how late it had become. The sky was already turning red.

"Hm... Looks good."

I gave the sextant a little shake to ensure the parts were all fixed together securely—sailors were likely to be rough with it. The parts that supported the most load were strong and unlikely to come apart, and they didn't rattle when I jostled them.

"This is perfect. I knew you'd come through."

"That's a relief."

"Thank you, once again. You're always helping me out."

"It's nothin'... The sky sure is clear today. You can see all the way to the mountains."

I looked to the west and, just as Lilly said, I could see the range of peaks that ran through the kingdom's center.

"Feeling homesick?" I asked.

Lilly's home was a small village on the far side of those mountains.

"You noticed?"

"You just looked a little sad."

"You sure are a charmer."

How does that make me a charmer?

"I'm homesick, yeah, but I don't wanna go back. Life ain't so convenient back there... What about you, Yuri? How's this place compare?"

"Me...? I never found things inconvenient back home, but Ho Province is so near the royal capital that I've barely left my homeland at all."

"I suppose so... And unlike me, you've got a kingeagle you can ride."

I'd definitely come from a place out in the sticks, but Lilly was on a different level.

It'd take about a fortnight to reach her village from here if she traveled by boat. It was a much shorter route if she were to cross over the mountains, but that involved traversing tall, treacherous trails. Where she was from, a simple visit to the royal capital was like a once-in-a-lifetime outing. It would be an easy trip there and back if she could ride a kingeagle, but she was already too old to start training.

"The sun's about to set. I'm almost finished with my work for today. If you're not busy, we could get dinner together—my treat. Then I'll escort you back to your dorm."

"Heh heh. I like the sound of that. I'll accept your offer."

Lilly smiled happily. The sun had sunk even lower on the horizon, and the light it cast on her face was soft and gentle.

Ms. Ether's Office

I was visiting Ms. Ether in her office with Myalo that day.

"I don't really understand the grammar in this part..."

Ms. Ether quickly realized what Myalo needed help with.

"You've gotten very good at Terolish, but I see you're still struggling with oral examples."

"Yes..."

"The subject and pronouns have been omitted, haven't they? See how much easier it is to understand if I add them back in?"

Ms. Ether wrote the sentence down on a scrap of Ho paper that I'd given her. She added several new words into the sentence that Myalo had been struggling with.

"But why were they omitted at all?" I asked. "The subject is clear enough from context, but removing the others just makes it difficult to understand."

"Omitting those words is a literary consideration that makes the sentence more poetic in nature. It flows better with those words removed and, well..."

The words *alta* and *sonala* have an idiomatic meaning, don't they? They turn the sentence into an instruction to face reality, and that's where the emphasis is. But see how that sense gets diluted if we add too many other words between them?"

Now that she'd pointed it out, I could see what she meant. Cutting the words in between made that impression as sharp as a slap in the face.

"But this sentence has a very literary tone. Unless you're planning on writing books or poems of your own, you only need to be able to grasp the meaning," she continued.

"I see..."

"Speaking of poetic language... I think it's this one here."

Ms. Ether took a book that was resting on a shelf just above her desk and then flicked through the pages, looking for something in particular.

"This passage is a famous example of poetic prose. See if you can translate it," she told Myalo.

"Um... The tiger that crawls on the ground looks enviously upon the hawk that rules the sky. But the hawk that rests upon a branch envies the tiger that runs across the firm ground... I think."

Myalo had translated it skillfully.

"You try the next part, Yuri."

"But the tiger cannot catch the hawk, and the hawk preys on rats. Though they live in the same place, their two worlds do not overlap."

"You're both very good," Ms. Ether praised us. "The grammar in these sentences is somewhat irregular because they prioritize the rhythm. Listen to how they sound when spoken."

Ms. Ether began to read the original Terolish aloud. When she read it with a touch of expressiveness, the sentences did indeed have a pleasing rhythm that made them sound like song lyrics.

"I see what you mean. There's quite an elegance to the wording," Myalo said.

Myalo, being highly cultured, must've felt something when hearing it.

"Normally, I'd recommend reading novels and poetry as a means of getting accustomed to text like this, but unfortunately, all I brought with me were these difficult books on history and religion. Works like these tend to shy away from that sort of descriptive prose."

"You could ask Harol Harrell for some help with that," I suggested. "It might make it easier for your students if they have some interesting novels to learn from."

Harol would have no trouble getting hold of books now that he'd started trading with the Albio Republic. Parchment books were a little pricey, but not excessively so if they were old copies.

"Oh, you're right. I'll make a request next time I see him."

The idea had pleased Ms. Ether, and it would surely please Harol too if he could do something for her.

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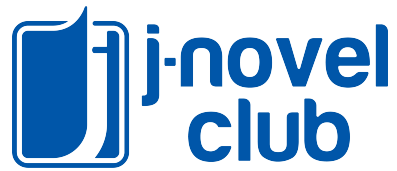
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The Conqueror from a Dying Kingdom: Volume 2

by Fudeorca

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